The SOB-SQUAD

CASLOW

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The Sob-Squad

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THE SOB-SQUAD

A Novel

By

WINFIELD H. CASLOW

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Chapter I.

AWAITING LAST RITES.

POMOROY was just one of those ordinary little country towns, where the postmaster read the postcards, and the grocer chewed "plug" over the crackerbox. Main Street wore that pasty complexion which may indicate either indigestion or a dissipated past. And, while it is true that complexions are never a disease in themselves, yet they often constitute a most suggestive symptom of something seriously wrong somewhere in the system.

Though Pomoroy's complexion was a symptom, it was not the only one. She had symptoms to burn! She had chills and fever; was easily startled into hysterics; she talked in her sleep; and her mental attitude toward the world had been so warped by her grievances, both real and imagined, that she had quite decided that the whole world was engaged in doing her ill. Consequently, she spent little time trying to do anyone good!

Any physician who is up on his diagnosis will tell you that the symptoms in this case all pointed to one conclusion: Pomoroy was a neurotic! And, like all victims of that malady, it was only to be expected that Pomoroy was *conscious* of all her symptoms. In fact, she had them all memorized and indexed; and she loved to gloat over them, as a miser over his gold, or a patient over the gruesome details of a major operation.

Things were wrong in Pomoroy, as everyone knew. Everyone said so; and everyone had his own idea as to exactly *what* was wrong, too! But, while everyone talked about their troubles, like Mark Twain's weather-critics, no one seemed to be doing much of anything about them. To tell the truth, no one was quite sure that he wanted to do anything about them; because, if nothing were wrong with Pomoroy, then there would be nothing to complain about. There was little enough to take up one's time in Pomoroy, as it was—and little enough to make life worth living. Talking about her troubles was Pomoroy's chief pleasure in life; so, why cure them? It were better to keep them as souvenirs!

Now, when things are wrong, someone must be to blame. Naturally! And Pomoroy knew who was to blame—or rather, who was *not;* for the merchants blamed the public, and the public blamed the merchants —and both joined to blame the wholesaler, the manufacturer, the politician, the railroads, speculators, education, religion, and prohibition. Blame anything or anyone, just so someone else beside the critic were held responsible! To think that Pomoroy was, herself, in any way to blame for the way things were going, never occurred to her mind. Her motto was simply this: "Everyone else is to blame but me!" In all her fault-finding, she clung tenaciously to the third person, because the first person could not, or would not endure sound doctrine!

Among other things, Pomoroy was religious. Oh, dear, yes! She boasted two churches, three lodges, a camp-meeting every other year, and the finest cemetery in fifty miles. Because she was religious, she was sym-

pathetic, too! How she loved to extend sympathy; and how she loved to receive it! She knew her platitudes, too; among them, the one about it being more blessed to give than to receive. And she believed it; but she believed, also, that it was good to receive—so she delighted to indulge in sympathizing with herself. That way, she both gave and received at the same time, and she didn't lose a thing!

Dad Shanks, the town philosopher, was the very incarnate spirit of Pomoroy. His hobby was civic uplift; and much of his life had been devoted to the task of keeping Milwaukee famous. But, in his sober moments, he was much given to studying Pomoroy's troubles, and rendering his opinion in very profound terms. Said he, on one occasion:

"Folks in these here parts has sure had their share of revivals and camp-meetin's; but it 'pears like their religion is a lot like Doc Pitman's vaccinations, 'cause it never jist *took*, somehow!"

Dad's experience in life had been much like Pomoroy's. To write his biography would be to write a history of the town. The time had been when Dad had seen his better days; but that had been years ago, while he was doing "toler'ble well." Then one day, a high-pressure young boom-maker breezed into Pomoroy, with blueprints and dreams of a way to make Pomoroy a real city. Railroads, shops and factories were going to be brought to Pomoroy; and Dad owned a farm that came up to the very edge of town. He could make himself rich, just as well as not, by selling all but the big "forty," and moving to town! That was what the young man advised; and that is what Dad had done!

Hardly had he moved to Pomoroy, when he began whittling little white stakes to sharp points.

However, before Dad had driven the last of the stakes in his big dandelion meadow, marking it out into the lots upon which Pomoroy's new boom-homes would be built, the young man disappeared—and all Dad's dreams of fame, fortune and retirement in old age in ease, fled. Those stakes still remained in the big "forty;" but each of them had come to be a cross upon which one of his hopes had been crucified. For each of those stakes, now turned a dirty gray with age, Dad had manufactured a naughty word to describe the meanness of the whole world in general, and of Pomoroy in particular. Out of it all, a sturdy soul emerged, sick with disappointment, while his easily tempted palate had developed an increased desire for Milwaukee's best—when he could get it! When he couldn't, he took his spite out upon anyone who chanced not to be present, so Dad seldom became involved in any arguments! It was Pomoroy's way to tell what she heard, or say what she had to say, about people; but she always told it to someone—anyone—else, other than to the parties, themselves! That precaution saved her a lot of trouble in proving things. She had troubles enough!

And, now, times had changed! *How* they had changed! Why, in the "good old days," the old-timers would gather in the rear of the drug store, and hover in breathless suspense over a game of checkers, as if the destinies of nations depended upon the next move! And Dad Shanks, being a Republican, would argue politics with Zeb White, the Democratic Chairman, until he was hoarse; yet, Zeb had never admitted that

the high protective tariff was right, nor would he yet allow himself to believe that "sixteen-to-one" would not have cured all the ills from which the country was now suffering! But those were the good old days that were forever gone!

Now, men didn't know whether they were Republican or Democrat—and they didn't care! And the *women* had ruined politics, anyhow! They had taken away the swinging doors; and Dad, in particular, could never forgive them for that! Gosh, it was hard to quench a thirst, now-a-days—all because women got into politics!

So, the Old Guard confined its attentions to the job of keeping in the shade, while the automobiles parked where the hitching posts used to be. There, they chanted a mournful dirge to the effect that the world was going to the dogs. Nothing good could come of young folks burning so much gasoline and so many cigarettes! And Dad invariably ended the ceremony by declaring that things were as they were because of "pure, common, everyday cussedness, and nothin' else but!" And, being religious, Pomoroy solemnly predicted that terrible judgment like that which fell upon Sodom and Gomorrah, must certainly come upon such days—but that was all she did about it!

Dad Shanks had been waiting a long time for something dreadful to come of it all; but his patience was about exhausted.

"We're all too durn robust in body fer our weakness of mind!" he sputtered one afternoon, while loafing in Jason Baker's grocery store. "Not nary one of us old bucks kin tell fer the life of us when our fust childhood ended, and our second one begun. Pomoroy was sure

did a dirty trick when the best sexton that ever pushed a spade into sod drapped off sorta sudden-like, and left so many other folks above ground!"

But it so happened that Dad had just been relating something particularly objectionable about a fellow-townsman; and it so happened that Jason, being an exception to the rule, in Pomoroy, hated gossip from the bottom of his big heart. So he paused on his fat legs, halfway between the coffee-keg and the pickle-barrel, just long enough to put a stop to it.

"This here town is full o' folks that's used to three square meals a day on a straight feedin' o' gossip done brown, taperin' off with a side-dish o' scandal fer dee-sert!"

Jason had said a mouthful, as usual; and Dad beat a retreat, as he always did, when Jason trained his guns on the old fault-finder. What Jason had said was true in every word! Anyone, being a stranger in Pomoroy, and walking down her sidestreets must have heard something like the sound of whispering of busy lips behind hands. This impression may have been suggested in the manner in which the shabby but once pretentious homes of a dead or dying aristocracy lurked behind their screens of untrimmed trees!

One of those periodic "Government Investigations" should have proven conclusively that Pomoroy's major population was a race of modern headhunters, who skulked in the ambush of what other people didn't know about them, while they awaited an excuse for sinking a shaft of dirty insinuation into the soul and reputation of anyone who might be so careless as to present his unprotected hide for a target!

Whatever the crime or misdemeanor of which one might be accused, in Pomoroy, all guilt was taken for granted, and any proof of innocence was a poor excuse at best. The Ladies' Aid Society had a perfect attendance record, for the reason that should any lady be absent, it was a sure bid for a post-mortem of her past. Pasts just would not stay dead in Pomoroy, unless one stood guard over them; so attendance at a given function was Pomoroy's first and best means of self-defense.

When a man marries for better or for worse, and his mate happens to be a member of the Ladies' Aid, he is almost certain to have poured into his ears all that has been said of someone else at the day's session; but, while he may start out disliking the diet, it is inevitable that, sooner or later, he will develop a taste for these choice morsels of social carrion. That was precisely what had happened to Dad Shanks, and most other men in Pomoroy! Gossip had become the cancerous thing which had taken hold upon her; and, while it was engaged in blackening her heart and besmirching her mind, it was likewise reaching out its tentacles to strangle the living breath out of the cash-register!

For instance, Mrs. Quiggel had not hesitated to publicly question the veracity of Jason Baker's vinegar measure, with the result that women now brought glass jugs, in order that the exact quantity of the contents could be checked at the time of purchase. But Jason had never known of it. That was Pomoroy's way of sparing his feelings!

Likewise, Mrs. Blindergast, who was known to buy the cheapest cuts of beef, insisted that Josh Warner's

best steaks were undoubtedly the finest half-soles to be purchased anywhere. But the only hint of such a rumor that ever came to Warner's attention was the fact that hamburger steak had come to be very popular, lately!

All this, and more of the same, was digging a gulf, deep and fixed, between and among the people of a neighborhood, where neighbors had missed the letter "N," while perusing the dictionary. That gulf promised a final resting place for what would have been Pomoroy's hopes, had she been guilty of such things. It was to be the bottomless pit, which would constitute the Sodom and Gomorrah, for which she had been waiting. Gossip had set neighbor secretly against neighbor; and it was now undermining the very counters of Main Street, quietly placing merchants at odds with their customers, while arousing suspicions of unfair competition between and among merchants, themselves!

That gulf was nothing but the abyss of the human heart which had been cursed with the Mark of Cain—jealousy, greed for gain, and selfish desire to have while another does without! And Big Business, seeing its chance, had made the most of its opportunity!

How easily it had been for the catalogue publishers and peddlers to picture the merchants of Main Street as commercial vultures—"middle men" whose sole mission in the world was to bleed the public. How easy to convince the people of Pomoroy that they should do all they could to save their money by buying where they could buy cheaper! Such economy was a virtue, of course; and Pomoroy prided herself upon her virtues, especially when they saved her money, rather than involving added cost. So, seeking her own, Pomoroy

branded the Men of Main Street as "Middle-Men." That made it easier for her conscience, while she made a merchant of her postmaster, and a delivery boy of her station agent.

Of all her people, the sole optimist on Main Street was Sam Cable, the village undertaker. If only he could survive that last touch of "rheumatiz" until folks began to find out what others had heard and said about them, they would be out shooting one another on sight. And that would be a rich harvest for Sam, for Pomoroy hadn't learned, as yet, how to buy a coffin from a picture in a catalogue!

Chapter II.

THE FORCE AND THE OBJECT.

SOL EBELL had been a hard worker in his day. A newspaper man of the old school, he had learned the printer's trade in the days when typesetting machines were still among the impossibilities. Tedious setting of galley after galley of five-point agate type had made of him a genuine plodder; but he had been a good newspaper man, and that was all that Pomoroy ever had a right to expect of him.

Experience had taught him in youth, long before he had come to Pomoroy, to always give his customers what they wanted. But he had labored for Pomoroy's civic betterment for more than thirty years; and, at the same time, he had all but starved to death—giving Pomoroy what she wanted!

Sol had never married. There were two reasons. One of them was that he could never afford it. He had too much competition in his business to make money. When a merchant wanted a thousand handbills printed, it was all that Sol could do to meet the other printer's price, in the next town; and, if he wanted this business, he must compete! For there wasn't a merchant on Main Street who couldn't go to Bluemont or Cascade for his printing, for a difference of fifty cents per thousand. Business was business, they told him; and Sol gave them what they wanted—cheap printing!

But this wasn't the only competition that Sol had been obliged to meet. His worst rival was gossip! Just let something unusual happen in Pomoroy; and the nimble tongues of the community would be on every telephone line! Before Sol could set the headlines, it was published all over the county! What chance had a newspaper to get out the "news" under such a handicap?

When the hopelessness of his situation dawned upon him, Sol gave up. He had once dreamed of the time when he would be a really constructive force in Pomoroy; but he at last had become convinced that nothing constructive would ever be permitted within the town limits. The time had now come when he could no longer make his accounts-receivable meet the total of his bills-payable; and Sol could not make himself face his creditors, now that there was no chance of ever paying what he owed. Fate had been against him; so he determined to call a showdown with Fate.

Accordingly, he trudged over to Tom Crandall's drug store; bought some little white pills; returned and locked himself up with his typecases and presses; and voluntarily gave up the ghost, among the files and cobwebs of a wasted lifetime.

Yes, Old Sol Ebell had failed in life; but he had achieved a triumph in death which was little short of vengeful. Dying, he had accomplished something he had never been able to do in his life. He created a sensation! There hadn't been a single suicide in King County since Ike Dolley hanged himself in the haymow because Bessie Skeinlogle eloped with the Roman-nosed drummer from Chicago! At last, Sol Ebell beat Madam

Gossip to the punch, and got away with his stuff before she knew anything about it!

Pomoroy mourned Sol's departure with genuine sincerity. She was going to miss Sol, because he had always been able to write such beautiful obituaries—and she hated to write obituaries, because it forced her to say nice things about folks who were dead, after she had said so many other kinds of things about them when they had still been alive. But, since he was gone, she supposed she might as well begin learning; so she wrote Sol's obituary—the nearest thing to a kind word she had ever been guilty of creating! Some of the nice adjectives which she used were creaky, like the rusty hinges of a gate long since fallen into disuse; but it was the best imitation of the truth that she had ever produced!

Give Pomoroy credit for one thing! Of all the things she knew about Old Sol Ebell, she never said a word about any of them to a living soul! She knew that he had been lazy. Otherwise, not being a family man, he should have saved up a little money. Yet, he had died without a dime; and, now, he was being buried at the county's expense (the old fool!), which meant higher taxes next year! And taxes were high enough now! All these, and more, she knew about; yet, like the true martyr she was, she suffered the injustice of it all, without a word of complaint. Not even a hint of a threat, when the funeral attendants joined in singing, "*We Shall Meet Beyond the River.*" It could never be said that Pomoroy was slack concerning her forgiveness —especially after the culprit was dead!

It is inevitable in cases of this kind, when a man dies without paying his debts, that certain modern Shylocks, called "creditors," will hardly wait for the last clod to thud on the roughbox, before they begin appearing before the judge to clamor for their respective pounds of flesh. In this instance, the Court named the Commercial Trust Company of Capitol City as receivers for the insolvent "Pomoroy Echo." On the Trust Company's staff was a young man by the name of Billy Bender, who had been engaged in the newspaper business for several years. Because of his technical knowledge of such things as type and cases, it seemed only good business to send Billy Bender to Pomoroy to take an inventory of stock and fixtures, survey the situation, and discover if possible precisely how many pennies to the dollar could be salvaged from the little which Sol Ebell had left.

That's how easy it is to explain how Billy Bender came to Pomoroy. But, when it comes to describing the ways and means which he employed to *stay* in Pomoroy—well, that's what our story is all about! It is sufficient, for the present, to say that BENDER STAYED!

Of course, it would never have been possible, had it not been that Bender had red hair, a prominent chin, and a mind of his own! Nothing short of such a combination, plus some Irish ancestors, and a certain ability to take charge of things and people, whether they liked it or not—nothing short of such a combination would have made him equal to the task of staying in a town like Pomoroy!

When Bender came to Pomoroy it did not take her many hours to discover that she had a problem on her hands. Pomoroy had a record for making today an exact reproduction of yesterday, with no new pattern for tomorrow. Her laws were like the laws of the Medes and Persians: *they changed not!* She still had an ordinance on the town books calling for a speed-limit of ten miles per hour! That was Pomoroy's way; and she expected everyone to respect it!

But, it so happened that Bender had a reputation, also. His name was just another word for "action." Like a line, he was the least possible distance between two given points. For him to decide upon doing a thing was to say that it was all done but the actual doing. He was simply a dynamic spirit which refused to remain two days in the same place without making someone suffer for it! That was Bender's way; and he didn't care whether people liked it or not! He had started his career as a go-getter; and he expected to devote the rest of his life to the job of proving his title!

So the scientist who claims that there can be no such thing as an irresistible force hitting an immovable object will have to guess again; for that is precisely what happened, when Bender came to Pomoroy! Dad Shanks and Zeb White were sitting together in front of the depot that morning, as Bender alighted from the train, and watched while the baggage man unloaded his numerous items of personal belongings. They composed a sort of official reception committee. Upon their reports concerning new arrivals, much depended as to

whether Pomoroy would be impressed favorably or unfavorably.

Bender was, in the words of Dad Shanks, "some man," for he stood not less than six-feet-two in his silk socks, and tipped the scales at slightly more than two hundred pounds. He was not heavy in appearance; on the contrary, he was almost slender. But there was that in his general carriage which advertised him as a possessor of two fists and a head, and fairly skilled in the scientific use of either or both. But he had two habits which were scarcely designed to win favor in Pomoroy, and Dad was quick to find both of them.

One of these was in his dress. He wasn't just well dressed—he was positively immaculate. From the precisely creased hat to the knifelike press of the trousers and the lustrous shoes, he was a picture of fastidiousness. But Dad hadn't any words with so many syllables; so he was satisfied to classify the stranger as a "dude."

Bender's other weakness was the way he looked at people when meeting them for the first time. He had blue eyes—hard-boiled, blue eyes, they were—which seemed to look right through a person without even trying! Fear, or any kindred sentiment, was as foreign to them as softness to granite. Not that they were cruel or baleful. Rather they had been trained to look for trouble, and ways to meet it. Nothing seemed to escape their gaze; even their merest glance seemed to penetrate with the directness of needles, and with something of the same sensation to the object of their look. Really, they were just the sort of eyes one would expect to come with red hair, two fists, and a prominent chin!

Dad Shanks could scarcely be expected to *see* all these things; but he *sensed* them. Despite the fact that Dad was anything but a coward, he felt better when Bender had finished looking him over and turned on his heel toward Main Street.

"Say, Zeb," he rasped, in his asthmatic wheeze, "Thet feller ain't nobuddy's fool, if anybuddy should happen to ast y'u!"

"I reckon you said it!" replied Zeb, blinking thoughtfully, "Kinda gets yer goat, the way he looks at y'u, don't he? Like as if he could search yer hip pockets without turnin' y'u around!"

By this time Dad was engaged in an inspection of the stranger's luggage.

"Huh!" he grunted, and spat contemptuously across the farther rail, "Name's Bender, accordin' to these here tags! Ain't that a fine lotta stuff to be bringin' to this man's town? Now, I ast y'u!"

Zeb's interest had become centered upon a bag of golf sticks.

"Shinney, by gum!" he snorted, "So, *he's* one o' them fellers that takes a half-day off to knock a white ball around a cow past're, and thinks he's havin' fun! Say, Shanks! Y'u don't s'pose he's gonna blossom out in a pair o' them pants that bags up around the knees, do y'u?"

"Y'u mean *bloomers?*"

"Bloomers er beeveedees!" exploded Zeb, "I'll bet my bottom dollar he's got a pair of 'em in that there trunk!"

Dad scratched his head, as he turned to gaze after the tall figure which was about to disappear through the door of the "Echo" office.

"And, from such as *him!*" he mused, "Who'da thunk ut! Zeb, if you'n me's gonna find out all about that bird, then somethin' tells me he's gonna be in this town a long, long time!"

Chapter III.

THE DYING OF THE "ECHO."

WHEN Bender came to Pomoroy as the representative of the Commercial Trust Company, acting on behalf of those whom Sol Ebell still owed, it was with a newly revived hope that had long burned low within him. Ever since he had been a member of the Capitol News staff he had entertained a desire to be owner and editor of his own newspaper, where he could do things to suit himself. He had entertained another desire, too—a desire to even some old scores. Now, he believed, was the ripe time to satisfy the first, and begin searching for ways and means to fulfill the second. Here was the opportunity to purchase a run-down institution for a little more than nothing, and build it up again as he should see fit.

It was characteristic of Billy Bender that he kept his own counsel in matters of business. When he had inventoried the plant, and arrived at the top figure which he would pay for it, he had wired his offer to headquarters. It was readily accepted. The transaction was executed, and Bender had returned to Pomoroy to remain—the new editor and sole owner of the suspended "Pomoroy Echo"—without a soul in the town having been asked a single expression of opinion in the matter! Even Lige Armstrong, the banker and recognized financial pillar of the community, declared that he had

known nothing of the deal until Bender entered his doors, introduced himself, and opened a checking account in the name of the "Pomoroy Echo!" Apparently, Bender had another weakness, which Pomoroy would find it hard to forgive: He insisted upon attending strictly to his own business! Such a thing constituted a decided breach in Pomoroy etiquette, and she would not thank him for it!

When, two days later, Bender added a second man to the "Echo" staff, Pomoroy sniffed. How in the world could he expect to make two meal tickets grow where one had starved to death—and he a Scotchman! It just couldn't be done! Bender would soon "come down a peg or two!" So Pomoroy sniffed again and waited.

It was a self-confident Bender who went forth, the morning after Nelson's arrival, a copy-pad in one hand, a sharpened pencil in the other, and no end of original ideas in his head! His course was decided, after much thought. The "Echo" must be revived; and Pomoroy must be awakened. Main Street must be taught to advertise. Incidentally, Bender must set out giving King County such a newspaper as she had never dreamed of having. That was the job; and he was the man who must do it!

The next five hours brought to Bender and Main Street, alike, an experience that was utterly unlike anything they had heretofore undergone. For Main Street, it was a painful one of listening to all the arguments known to advertising salesmanship, and answering with all the alibis known to merchants who have consistently refused to indulge in such a business luxury! She had

told herself for years that she did not need to advertise, because *she* was different! Everybody knew she was there; so, why advertise? And, as for Bender, it was an equally painful ordeal, this vain attempt at pitting logic and sense against downright apathy and unwillingness to hear!

The net result of this first hand-to-hand conflict between Bender and Main Street was that Bender was obliged to confess to himself a very grim fact. He had come off second-best! Now, that he had done his best, he faced the situation which had developed.

"The Old Girl's got her dukes up, all right!" he told himself, as he emptied his pockets of the alleged "advertising copy" which he had succeeded in collecting, "Either I'm not the Bender I used to be, or this is going to be a tougher job than I had figured it to be!"

One by one, he spread out before him the miscellaneous array of "ads" that had been given him. Then, one by one, he read them over:

"Jason C. Baker, Staple and Fancy Groceries."

"Harry Waltz, Dry Goods and Notions."

"Warner's Market, Choice Quality Meats."

"Crandall's Drug Store, Ice Cream, Candy, Cigars, and Prescriptions."

And so on, *ad infinitum!*

Bender read them over, and sighed.

"Ye gods! And they call this *advertising!*" he groaned.

Bender did not require much time in thought to realize that he was "in a hole." During his first battle with Pomoroy's merchants, he had been extravagant in his promises. He had told them in glowing terms that he was going to put out a *special edition;* that it

was going to be unlike any newspaper King County had ever known; and that he was going to make the public "sit up and take notice" of Pomoroy and her merchants! All these had been promised unconditionally; and it was now up to him to make good! As he looked at the "ads" before him, their utter innocence of anything approaching originality or "punch" fairly slapped him in the face! A fine lot of stuff to make a "special edition!"

As he stared at the tormenting bits of paper, Bender smiled. It was not such a smile as one often sees. In fact, it was not a smile at all, but rather a grimace It was a crooked thing, which started just under the right eye, high up on the cheekbone, where a muscular spasm seemed to crinkle for a moment, before it slid in a slippery, sidelong course along the twisted lips, and dripped from the left corner of the mouth and over the jaw.

Nelson, who had known Bender well in the old days, when he had been on the News staff, watched that smile come and go.

"He's just telling himself that he's licked!" he grinned, "Which is a sure sign he *ain't!* The old burg better look out! Something's hatching in that red head, or my name ain't Nelson!"

That "something" had, in fact, already "hatched!" Bender was doing some real thinking, and not altogether in vain. Pomoroy, he had decided, was "dead." Likewise, also, was Main Street—and the "Echo!" Where death has come, revivals are impossible. There is but one thing to be done. The dead must be buried, in the hope that resurrection might follow, in due course

of time! So, in order to fulfill his promises to the merchants, he must publish a "special edition;" and it must be different than anything they had ever seen before. Furthermore, it must make the public "sit up" and "take notice!" Would his idea work? Would it live up to all he had said it would be?

Bender smiled again, that crooked, zig-zag grin.

"Well, *rather!*" he declared, "I'd say it filled all the specifications, with something left over for good measure!"

He swung about, in Sol Ebell's old, creaky, swivel-chair, and gazed out upon Main Street.

"She wins the first round!" he confessed to himself, "She's hard-boiled, and I don't mean maybe! I never met such a hide-bound bunch of merchants in my life! If you want to get a rise out of them, you might as well talk to a row of pop-bottles! They've got me licked, on the first set, and they know it! They're laughing up their sleeves, right now, because they've slipped one over on a city guy who is trying to tell them something about running their business! But—"

He mentally shook his fist at Main Street.

"Look out for the rebound, boys!" he told them, silently, "Billy Bender knows how to lose the first round, in order to put over a knockout in the second! If I don't wipe that grin off their faces Thursday evening, I'm not the man I think I am!"

Thursday evening arrived, precisely as every previous Thursday evening since the eldest could remember. Pomoroy was very complacent, and Main Street sublimely composed, as they waited in the Post Office for the postmaster to complete his distribution of the day's

last mail. They discussed the weather, and the crops, and the markets, and the latest bits of gossip, totally ignorant of the struggle which had only begun at the lower end of Main Street, where a young man with red hair and a prominent chin had only begun to grapple with a problem which was to mean the future salvation or collapse of an entire community. Strangely enough, Bender was not even mentioned that evening; and it was better so, for, had he been introduced into the idle conversation, he would have received nothing more than another sniff of scorn.

Nothing was farther from Pomoroy's mind that evening than Billy Bender and his problem—until the tiny window opened, and boxes began disgorging their contents. Then, Pomoroy remembered very casually that this *was* Thursday evening. Well! Well! She would see what the young upstart had to say, anyhow.

As copies of the "special edition" came into evidence, one by one, citizens of Pomoroy glanced casually at the front page, blinked, and looked again. With a catch of the breath, they read the bold headline extending across the entire page, and perused with more or less minute readings the contents of the text-matter. Now and then, a merchant would refer to the inside pages, searching for something. Apparently, finding it, he would stare in surprise for a moment, mutter something under his breath, fold the paper and stuff it roughly into his pocket, and stalk out.

Dad Shanks had been among the first to secure his copy; and he had already digested much of the general matter of the front page before others had more than scanned it.

"Wal, I'll swan!" he ejaculated, "I never did see sech Gospel truth in a newspaper before in all my born days!"

Evidently, Dad was enjoying himself immensely, as he read:

"THE ECHO IS DEAD; BURIAL FOLLOWS!" screamed the headline.

Following, the announcement read thus, in part:

> "When, in the course of human events, a wayfarer happens upon the lifeless remains of another, there devolves upon him the grim duty of burying said remains, with whatever thoroughness and dispatch the rules of decency and the implements at hand will permit.
>
> "It happens that the writer arrived in Pomoroy early in the week, and found that an institution, known as the *Pomoroy Echo* had long since yielded up the ghost. Being somewhat human in our sentiments, and entertaining certain conceptions as to what constitutes propriety, we have seen fit to announce that this paper is hereby being put out of sight, forever.
>
> "In case there are those who question the wisdom of this action, we shall state our reasons for taking such a course. In the first place, an echo is a fleeting thing at best. Secondly, it is only the remains of a past noise, having been dependent upon the orginal noise for its very creation. Very frankly, from this time on, we refuse, in this office, to be mistaken for the offspring of something else. In other words, that which emenates from our presses, hereafter, will be the *original noise, itself!*
>
> "What is said of the *Echo* may be said of all Pomoroy, with equal truth. Not content with merely burying this paper, we hereby serve notice upon this town, its merchants, its people and its

spirit, that the Old Pomoroy is *dead*—and they, likewise, are being put out of sight and out of mind!

"The past habits of this community—its gossip, its hypocrisies, and its conduct of business—as previously reported and commented upon in these columns, are to be considered buried from this moment on. And we also wish to serve notice that we shall promptly prosecute in the court of public opinion anyone whom we apprehend in the act of cheating the undertaker, hereafter. The rest of this edition is devoted to the obituaries of the more prominent of those deceased."

Another article, under the title, "*Coronor's Report*," read:

"The *Echo* was pronounced dead by the undersigned last Monday evening after a brief examination of the remains. As nearly as could be ascertained, the end came as the result of complications, for which there is no cure to be found in all the doctor books of journalism. It is known to me, upon investigation of the files and records of the deceased, that the departed was unable to survive a combination of creeping paralysis and malnutrition. Weakness of the heart developed, followed by poor circulaton. In fact, had all subscriptions been ordered paid-in-advance, the circulation would have ceased two years ago. Death finally came, to relieve the patient of its sufferings, when a stroke of apoplexy came, upon the announcement of an increase in advertising rates. The end was instantaneous and painless; no inquest will be ordered. (Signed) William B. Bender, Coronor."

A third item aroused no little comment from the amused Dad, as he read aloud to such as had failed to bring their glasses with them:

"Next week, the office formerly occupied by the *Echo* will begin publication of a new and different weekly paper, to be known as *The Pomoroy Pilot*, whose business it will be to look ahead, and act as a guide for the community. We shall exercise every possible scrutiny in our labors for a better Pomoroy; and we shall not hesitate to wield a strong-arm pen in steering a course that shall be as free as possible of rocks and shoals.

"There are troubled times ahead for this community. Problems of the most serious nature are developing, and demand drastic action. It is our purpose to deal with them in a two-fisted manner, without fear of the mighty, or favor toward the strong.

"We hope against hope that every citizen of this community will be our friend, because we shall need friends, more than anything else. Second in importance among our needs are active *enemies!* So those who will not be our friends we shall convert into outright enemies as rapidly and as definitely as possible. We love to have friends, and we must have enemies but we cannot and *will not be ignored!*

"There will be those who will criticize us; and there will be those who will damn us from the bottom of their hearts, sooner or later. Question our judgment, if you wish; but please admire our courage, at least!"

Dad and his audience were interrupted at this point by the postmaster, who announced that it was time to lock up for the night. So the rest of Pomoroy went home to read to their satisfaction, or their despair, all that Bender had placed in print, in celebration of this most unique funeral.

At that precise moment, Harry Waltz was engaged in a silent, but none the less profane, review of Bender's advertising genius. There, in bold, black type, that seemed to stand out with blazing prominence, was his ad, bordered in heavy, depressing, crepe-like design:

Here Lies
HARRY WALTZ
His Dry Goods and His Notions

Meanwhile, Josh Warner was throwing a fit as he beheld his own "ad," decorated with an ornate coffin in bold relief above the words:

In Fond Memory of
WARNER'S MARKET
And Its Choice Quality Meats

Jason Baker sat at his desk, his shaggy brows beetled in righteous wrath, as he read, for the twentieth time, the words of his own contribution, chief space in which was given to a most suggestive print of a lily:

Gone—But Not Forgotten!
JASON C. BAKER
Staple and Fancy Groceries

Such "advertising" Pomoroy had never seen, nor even imagined. But, while she read and smiled, read again and laughed aloud, Main Street read and swore at the same time. Not a single merchant had been spared. With a fairness that was unimpeachable, Bender had consigned each and every dealer to the same cemetery, and none could say that he had been slighted. And Main Street's individual, private sentiments were voiced in various terms, but all unanimous in their sum-total:

that Bender had not only made a fool of himself, but that he had actually made laughing stock of every business house in the town. For which, dire consequences should be visited upon his head. The sole exception to the rule was Tom Crandall.

Tom was always the exception on Main Street. And, now, as he leaned upon the cigar-case, and read the "advertising columns" of this funeral edition, he grinned broadly his appreciation of something which seemed to appeal to his sense of humor. What he read was etched, as it were, upon the face of a huge tombstone, which stood out upon the page in bold relief, a kindly and sympathetic token:

At Rest!
CRANDALL'S
DRUG STORE
Ice Cream—Candy
Cigars Prescriptions

While he yet read, Glenn Darling entered.

"Hello, Tom!" was his greeting, "Say, Josh Warner just stopped me on my way down, and told me to tell you that there is going to be a meeting at Jason's Store at eight o'clock, and that it's going to be important. Seems like the merchants are going to have an indignation meeting of the departed—a sort of seance, or something of the kind. Wow, but they're a sore bunch, and I don't mean maybe."

Crandall folded the paper, and laid it aside.

"I was just thinking that Bender had started something. I suppose there will be a scalping party in the old town tonight!"

Darling laughed.

"Right! But let me tell you something, Old Man, I happen to know what kind of an onion this man Bender is, so I'd advise you not to be careless when you start out peeling him, or you'll be crying before you have begun. I know him. I was hanging out in Capitol City when he cleaned Old Haine's clock, during that big milk scandal, down there! He's a bad actor, Bender is; so handle him with care, or he'll blow you all to bits. He's dynamite, he is."

Crandall rested upon his elbows, while he studied his informer for a moment.

"That's the way I had him sized up, the first time I met him!" he agreed, "And there's nothing I'd like better than to see him in action. Otherwise, I wouldn't go to the meeting; but, I will, upon one condition."

Darling smiled expectantly.

"Shoot!" said he.

"Listen. You must help me in this deep plot." pleaded Crandall, his eyes snapping with excitement, "You say the meeting's called for eight o'clock, at Jason's place. That means that Josh Warner's calling the meeting. He always wants Jason to be the goat for what he does. And they'll all be there, right on the dot, too, or I'm a liar! Now, here's the plot, you old pirate, and it's up to you to turn the trick. Do it, and you'll be in on the fun.

"Give them about a half-hour to talk their troubles over. They ought to be good and hot about that time. Then slip Bender the word that the merchants are in session at Jason's store and they want him to come

before them and explain himself and apologize for what he has done. Get me?"

Darling whistled.

"Boy, I'm usually 'way ahead of you, but you beat me to it this time! Do I get you? I'll tell the world, and I'm just the guy who can do the job to perfection. I won't only have him there at the proper time, but I'll have him all cocked and primed. Meanwhile, you take care of things at the other end and have them all good and sore."

Crandall made an expressive gesture of finality.

"Leave that to me. Don't I know how to bait these mossbacks to fighting pitch? You just see to it that Bender turns up, with a temperature about forty degrees above normal, and I'll guarantee to have a warm reception all set for him—at eight-thirty, sharp."

Darling started toward the door, grinning from ear to ear.

"At eight-thirty, sharp," he repeated.

Chapter IV.

COCKED AND PRIMED.

GLENN DARLING would have been a most interesting subject of study for the inquisitive souls of Pomoroy, had he ever been sufficiently important; and he would have been important enough, perhaps, had he come to Pomoroy a stranger. Unfortunately for him, however, he had never been taken seriously, even after his return from a four-year absence from the town, for the simple reason that he had been born and raised in Pomoroy. As a boy, he had been regarded as a "book-worm"; and, while he had always been a "nice boy", and stood at the head of his class, he had never been given more than a passing notice. It was the old, old story of the prophet being without honor in his own country. Pomoroy awarded no prizes or public mention to anyone, simply because they behaved themselves, and managed to keep out of jail.

So, when Darling had gone to Capitol City, after his graduation from High School, to take up the profession of Law, Pomoroy merely sniffed and Darling pouted. He didn't want to study law; but he did it because his mother had her heart set upon the legal profession as her boy's road to fame, and he had accepted his mother's wishes as he had always done—which may have been the reason for Pomoroy's refusal to take the boy seriously. Pomoroy hated a "sissy."

But, when Glenn Darling returned to Pomoroy, after a four-year boarding-house residence in Capitol City, and became an alleged Attorney-at-Law, with a regular though untidy suite of offices over the Bank, few if any shared the mother's pride in the fact that Pomoroy now had a lawyer of her own. Darling had always been taken as a matter of course, and probably always would be.

If Darling had never proven exceptional ability or energy in his legal pose, it was because he was interested in other things; for he was a student of genuine intelligence, and he seldom applied his able gray-matter to a given subject without deriving something definite from his deliberations. He had never amounted to much as a lawyer, as yet; but that was because he had never studied law any more than he had to in order to prove title to the profession. His interests lay in a far different field of human endeavor. In fact, they lay in two fields, *Business* and *Politics!*

Even in High School, Glenn Darling had always been the first reader of the Current-Events Column; and he had never lost his zest for close analysis of the political and commercial signs of the times. There was so much of mystery and intrigue in it all that he gravitated to it as a moth to a flame. That was how he had come to know so much about Billy Bender, without Billy Bender having so much as met Pomoroy's distinguished young lawyer.

When Darling left Tom Crandall's Drug Store, he did not go directly to Bender's office. He was too wise for that. His watch told him that he still had an hour in which to put over this "frame-up"; and his knowledge

of Bender told him, likewise, that this was a situation which demanded some careful planning before any work should be done. Accordingly, he strode across the street in the gathering dusk, climbed the unlighted flight of stairs to his office over the Bank, locked himself in, and sat down in the twilight near a window commanding a view of the "Echo" office, where he could see Bender at his desk in the full glow of an electric desk-lamp, and gave himself up to a review of all that he knew about Pomoroy's new and rather unsatisfactory editor.

It had been two years ago that his attention had first been attracted to Billy Bender. As nearly as he could ever learn, Billy was a self-made man, who had come up in the School of Hard Knox. What he had made for himself he had won by his own two-fisted efforts, for he had few friends who could claim more than mere acquaintance. He was what the Westerner would have termed a "Lone Wolf", keeping his own counsel, and thanking no one for butting in. Darling had always wondered at that. Bender was, really, a likeable chap. He would have made friends easily, had he tried; but, apparently, he did not care for them. At least, that was his reputation among those who knew him best.

Bender had been a member of the News Staff, when Darling first came across him. It seemed that Bender stood pretty well with his chief, too; for it was whispered about that whatever Bender wanted to publish in the editorial columns met with Tyrone's ready favor. Tyrone had been editor of the News for years; and his reputation for fearless championship of the public's rights had spread far and wide. To stand in well with the Old Man was an achievement of no mean magnitude,

for it testified to certain sterling qualities of character. To be Tyrone's favorite, on the News, was to be respected by everyone connected with the News. And Bender, as a reporter and editorial writer had certainly stood ace-high with the Old Man, such as none before him had ever done.

The incident which gave rise to Darling's first interest in Bender, while Darling had been engaged as an understudy of Law in the city, transpired when the News came out with an editorial dealing with the subject of milk prices in Capitol City. It seemed that Jasper Haine, the greatest capitalist in the State, had just purchased the Capitol City Creamery Company; and it was whispered about in business circles that Haine was going to "start something" in the milk business. Just what would be the outcome, no one knew; but, when Jasper Haine launched into a new field of operation, it meant just one thing—a cleanup for Jasper Haine.

No sooner had Haine completed the transaction, through one of his many incorporated agencies, than a number of smaller milk dealers appeared before the City Commission, and asked for an investigation of prevailing milk prices by a committee of disinterested citizens which the Commission might name, the committee to report its full finding to the Commission for publication. The petition was granted; and the committee was named. Thirty-eight local citizens went into a close study of the milk business in Capitol City, with free access to every local milk man's books, save one, *The Capitol City Creamery Company!*

When the report came back, it was unanimous opinion of the thirty-eight citizens that the existing price of milk was precisely what it should be to insure the dealers a legitimate profit for their services. In fact, it was hinted that a cent increase per quart would not be out of line.

Then, the News threw its bombshell into Haine's scheme by coming out boldly with a front-page story, bearing Billy Bender's name as the author. It told how the attention of the News had been called to Haine's purchase of the Capitol City Creamery, and the suspicions which it had aroused in the minds of other milk dealers. The News had made a secret investigation, and confirmed the suspicions. Haine was preparing to cut the prices of milk and cream to a point against which other milk dealers could not compete. This, of course, would drive the smaller men out of business, and leave the field to Haine's company.

Accordingly, the plea for a public investigation into milk prices had been submitted on the suggestion of the News, to forestall Haine's plans. It had been established that the prices in force were fair, if not too low. Therefore, any reductions on the part of the Capitol City Creamery would be public evidence of Haine's intentions,and it would be up to the public to stand by the Independent Dealers and pay the fair price, if Haine's scheme was to be defeated.

The thing had been so neatly done that every consumer in Capitol City arose in wrath, and refused to buy milk or cream from the Capitol City Creamery Company. And Bender had turned the trick, *alone!* How Old Tyrone must have laughed up his sleeve to think

that his pet reporter had stepped up against Haine, single-handed, and dragged him out into the light, with all his tricks hanging to him.

But Haine had not stopped with that. Of course, he dropped his plans for driving the Independent Milk Dealers out of business; but he turned his brains to other plans. Nothing was heard about "milk" for several weeks. Then, one morning, it was reported in the paper that the State Health Department had started prosecutions against fourteen local milk dealers for unsanitary conditions in their plants, and other indictments were being prepared.

But, the next day, all fourteen defendants appeared before the judge and entered pleas of "not guilty"; and Bender was reported to have been present. A test case was to be tried. Rumors began floating around that Haine was showing his hand again. Meanwhile, the Capitol City Creamery Company had blossomed out in full page adevertisements, in all the dailies except the News, featuring "hooded bottles", "sterilized air" and various other items of sanitation entering into the Capitol City Creamery's methods of milk preparation and distribution.

Here was a new angle. If reports and charges were true, the public health was being threatened. "Trust" or no "trust", life and health came first. The public began swinging to the Capitol City Creamery for its milk supply. It began to appear that Haine was going to score after all.

Then Bender struck again, and this time it was the death blow to Haine's milk manipulations. On the evening, just previous to the date for trial of the test

case by the State, out came the News with another detailed account, under Billy Bender's name, telling the public a story that made popular sentiment boil.

According to his report, Bender had personally conducted an investigation of Haine's part in the State's attempted prosecutions. He had found that Haine had spent twenty-five thousand dollars in the last political campaign in which the new Governor had been elected. Following Haine's failure to stage a price-war in milk, due to Bender's previous activities, the Governor had ordered the creation of a new division in the Department of Public Health. It was known as Meat and Milk Inspection; and a man who had, for six years, been Haine's own private secretary, was appointed to take charge of the new division. Now, this very division, under the direction of Haine's former lieutenant, was pressing charges against local Independent Milk Dealers, in the name of the People.

Darling grinned broadly, as he recalled these details. Bender had done it so cleverly. Not a single charge had he made against Haine, the Governor or the Capitol City Creamery. He simply told the facts and left the charges to be made by the reader, in his own mind. No wonder that the State withdrew its case the next morning before court opened. And that had been the end of Haine's "Milk Trust" which never materialized. It died for want of patronage from a public who insisted upon taking its own chances with germs—preferring Microbes to Milk Trusts.

Of course, Bender couldn't last always, in his fight against Haine. Tyrone was an old man, when Bender began working for him; and, when it was reported one

morning that the Old Man had passed out into the Great Beyond; and, when an eastern syndicate purchased the News from Tyrone's estate, the policy of the paper was changed to serve the cash register of the advertising department, rather than the public—and Bender's resignation came in promptly, before the new Editor-in-chief had time to request it. That had been the last Darling had heard of him, until he had turned up in Pomoroy, with a newspaper of his own. Of course, Bender was up to some game; and Darling meant to find out what it was. Men like Bender didn't come to towns like Pomoroy and buy bankrupt newspapers without a definite purpose in mind.

Again, Darling fell to wondering about Bender, himself. It was apparent that Bender hated Haine. He had repeatedly proven that. What was more, Bender was known to be an outright enemy of the "modern trend" in Business. Time and again, he had written fearlessly in the News editorial columns, article after article, denouncing the growing tendency of Business toward consolidations, mergers, alliances and combines. When a great transaction was reported in the realm of Big Business, in which two or more large operators joined forces, Bender's pen would spit editorial fire, with adjectives designed to make the public's ears burn.

Particularly, was Bender's antagonism aroused, when the activities of the Mail-Order Houses and Peddlers became noticeable; and, when the Chain-Store idea first began to attract public notice, Bender fairly scorched the pages of the News with the heat of his denunciations. Then, a big merger took place in Detroit, in which certain automobile makers entered into family

relations. Certain railroad systems joined hands, with Government sanction. Amalgamations were coming thick and fast. Bender's tirades against them had come to be a feature in the News; and Darling had followed it with growing admiration for the writer. Then came the notorious "Oil Scandal", in which the plottings and counter-plottings of petroleum magnates and political figures in high places in Washington were bared to the public. It was then that Bender actually exploded. His anti-syndicate column literally thundered its volcanic damnations of Big Business which would stoop to such prostitutions of trade.

It was in the very midst of this eruption that Bender's column was silenced. Disappointed, but more than ever a believer in his hero, Darling had looked in vain for more of Bender's scathing expressions in such publications as came to his attention. There were none. Apparently he had been muzzled and gagged. At any rate, he had, as a writer, come to be a total eclipse; and, not daring to hunt him up, and make his personal acquaintance, lest such presumption would meet with rebuff, Darling had contented himself with watchful waiting for the day when Bender would bob up again. He wouldn't always remain mute. Of that, Darling had been confident; and, now, his confidence was to be exonerated. Bender was in Pomoroy on some specific errand and he would bear watching.

Darling's watch told him that it was now eight-fifteen. It was time for action; yet, he had not decided upon what course that action should take. Oh, well, he would have to feel his way. Anyhow, it shouldn't take much diplomacy to stir Bender to a fighting pitch.

to "get a rise" out of him would be about as difficult as pulling a hair-trigger.

Darling looked down upon the unlighted windows facing upon Main Street. Even Crandall's store was dark. Jason's store was the only lighted place on the street; and there, the curtains had been drawn. Darling smiled.

"They're in session, all right," he told himself, "and I'll bet Crandall's teasing them up to about a hundred-and-ten in the shade. Poor Old Main Street. They think they're going to take a fall out of Bender; but it's up to me to see that they get a 'rise' out of him, instead. I feel sorry for them; but it's all for their own good. Now, to Bender's, and a battle royal."

Bender was reading a trade journal when Darling bolted into his office, apparently much in a hurry.

"Say, you're Mr. Bender, aren't you?" he asked in an excited tone.

"Not yet. I may be, by the time I'm fifty." grinned Bender. "Just Billy Bender, without the 'Mister'."

Darling had carefully planned all this out in the two minutes which had transpired since leaving his office.

"Then, you're the fellow I'm looking for. There's a bunch of merchants over at Jason Baker's grocery store, and they're right het up over what you had in the paper, tonight. Some of them thought you ought to apologize to them, right now. Maybe that would be a good idea for you, because you can't get anywhere rubbing the fur the wrong direction, you know. Of course, you didn't mean it the way it reads, but . . . "

Bender's chin had thrust out a surprising distance.

"Who says I didn't mean it?" he challenged.

Darling's face must have been that of an actor, for it simulated a look of blankest astonishment which successfully concealed the triumphant gleam in his eyes.

"You mean that you *meant* it . . . *that way?*" he gasped.

"Precisely!" snapped Bender, rising to the bait.

"Well, I'll be doggoned." exclaimed Darling, "You sure beat cats getting under the house. Then, I guess Tom Crandall's right."

Bender's interest quickened. This young chap was apparently nothing more than a village ne'er-do-well, and official tale-bearer. But a little information might help, regardless of its source.

"What did Crandall say about it?" he asked.

"Nothing much; only that you was independent, and that you wouldn't apologize, if you hung for it. He said it was no use asking you to take anything back, because you wouldn't show up. Then, one of the other fellows said he thought you wouldn't, either, if you knew what was good for you. And I reckon he's right, too. They are a bad bunch when they're mad. Maybe, it would be better to let them cool off, first, before you try to patch things up. Then, you can work on them, one by one!"

Darling indulged in a broad grin, as Bender turned his back in the act of reaching for his hat.

"If that's the case," retorted Bender, taking the lure with a final snap, "I'll be right with them. Show me the way, young man, and if you'll introduce me to the

crowd, I'll show you a trick or two in the art of making apologies."

Darling hugged himself, as he stepped out into the night, while Bender switched off the lights and locked the door.

"Gosh!" he chuckled to himself, "When it comes to *tricks*, I know a thing or two about making Bender come around. And *that's* something Haine would like to know . . . and Main Street will soon wish *she* understood. Wow! This will be a party, thanks to yourself, Mr. Darling. For the first time, you are all to me that your name implies."

Chapter V.

ONE MAKES A MAJORITY.

IT WAS supposed to have been a closed meeting; and it had required all Tom Crandall's resourcefulness to manage the unbolting of Jason's front door, while those present were unanimously attentive to Josh Warner's spirited tirade against Bender's editorial performances. But, at last, he had succeeded in sauntering leisurely and aimlessly to the door, leaned against it for a moment, slipped the bolt behind him, and returned to a seat near Josh, facing the irate merchants of Main Street.

It was a long discussion, in which Crandall refused to participate, until his watch told him that the time had come. It was just two minutes to the appointed time for Bender's arrival. He must have this house in order for a warm reception of the offender who was just about due to arrive.

"Well, gentlemen, I think we are pretty well agreed." Tom interjected, proceeding to take the floor. "Personally, I am convinced that Bender has been fairly tried, and found guilty, by unanimous vote of this jury, on a charge of telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"It so happens that this is a serious offense in Pomoroy; and I believe, with you, that Bender should get the lesson of his young life."

The front door had just opened, and Bender slipped in, followed noiselessly by Crandall's fellow-conspirator.

"I repeat!" raved Crandall, with lifted voice, for Bender's especial benefit, "Bender ought to have the lesson of his life, for what he has done! We don't have to stand for this sort of thing! And, since he has the nerve to butt in on this meeting, without invitation, I am going to ask Mr. Bender if he will please come forward, now, and apologize! If he didn't mean it just the way it has turned out to be, I think we ought to give him another chance; but, if he refuses to do that . . . out he goes! Mr. Bender now has the floor."

Main Street's heart missed a beat, as Crandall introduced the speaker of the evening, who had not been mentioned on the program. It was all so beautifully timed. Crandall's first ironical jibe, about Bender having told the "truth", had been uttered before Bender's entrance; so what he had really said for the benefit of the merchants, and what Bender had heard, were exactly opposite in meaning, but cunningly designed to bring Main Street's flint and Bender's steel together. Fireworks were the next in order.

As Bender swung into view before his self-appointed inquisitors, a comic study in expressions was presented to the outwardly solemn but inwardly convulsed druggist. The business men of Pomoroy registered every imaginable emotion, from stupid amazement to downright panic. The only exception to the rule was Jason Baker. That worthy, none too "slow", himself, in mat-

ters of human nature study, looked quizzically at Crandall; and, encountering the latter's gaze, Jason winked, slowly and emphatically. Tom flushed, slightly. He hadn't fooled Jason. The old duck was wise to him. He might have known he wouldn't put anything over on Jason.

Meanwhile, Bender had done a strange thing. Taking his position squarely before his critics, he stood speechless for a full half minute, while that odd, unlovely grimace wrinkled the cheek, just beneath the right eye, and shot a zig-zag course along the twisted lips to the left jaw. He was laughing at them—the young hyena! Actually *laughing!*

"If I understand you correctly," he began, finally, turning to nod to Crandall, "The merchants of Pomoroy do not take kindly to my ideas in journalism. This is not the first time my methods have been criticized, simply because I insisted upon telling the truth. As for running me out of town, gentlemen, let me remind you that I came to Pomoroy, without invitation or advice; and I came under my own power. When I choose to leave Pomoroy, I shall do so under precisely the same conditions. I hope, now, that we understand each other; for that is the nearest thing to an apology which this meeting will secure from me."

Bender seemed on the point of returning to his seat, when Crandall spoke up.

"Your remarks are very plain, Mr. Bender. I move that the apology be accepted. It is very satisfactory to me."

Jason coughed again, and a shuffling uneasiness rippled over the crowd.

"Now, Mr. Bender," continued Crandall, "Would you mind giving us the foundation for your contention that we merchants are all dead ones?"

Bender drew a memorandum from his pocket, and began reading some local statistics, designed to interest merchants in any town. Last year's total mail-order business as reported through the Pomoroy Post Office . . . the number of catalogues distributed through that office, at the last catalogue publication period . . . the fact that one peddler, alone, had canvassed Pomoroy last week, and, in one day, secured orders for five suits and two overcoats . . . another fact, to the effect that the Ladies' Aid Society had entertained five outside representatives, who had readily paid the Society a bonus for its co-operation in introducing their wares, in direct competition to local merchants . . . and another disquieting statement that buying-clubs among community women's organizations had totaled sales to the extent of seven thousand dollars in the past year, in groceries and kindred staples, alone.

"We have two grocery stores and one meat market in Pomoroy," concluded Bender, returning the paper to his pocket, "But what do the figures show? If all the people whom Pomoroy should logically serve were to buy their groceries and meats in Pomoroy, it would mean more than one hundred fifty thousand dollars per year. Mr. Baker, you three merchants won't total a volume to exceed half that. And you know it, if you have ever stopped to use your pencil for real figures.

"Yet, Jason Baker, Pomoroy's leading grocer, who is losing trade every day to outsiders who push their advertising into this community, has the nerve to run

his name, and the fact that he is selling *staple and fancy groceries*, in a special edition of my paper . . . and he calls that *advertising!*

"Frank Ripple runs the only garage in our town. He needs some figures, too. There were two hundred and eleven automobile license plates delivered through this Post Office last January. That means that Frank Ripple might have sold eight hundred forty-four tires last year and this, at least. Yet, he tells me that he has sold not more than one hundred and fifty. He runs an ad in the local paper . . . a *special edition*, mark you! . . . and all he has to tell the world is the fact that Frank Ripple sells tires. That's *his* idea of *advertising*. Ye gods! If that's advertising, then a cemetery is a carnival!"

Jason had been looking down his nose throughout this broadside. Now, he cleared his throat.

"I reckon them's real figgers you're givin' us," he admitted. "And yer right, when you tell us that our advertisin' is bunk. But, if folks is doin' their buyin' elsewhere, what are you gonna do about it, as a merchant?" he asked.

"What are you going to do about it?" flared Bender, "Why, if you're half alive, you're going to go out after that business with blood in your eye, and find out *why* people go away for something that they can buy just as well at home."

"Mebbe they can't," suggested Jason, calmly.

"Then, it's up to you to see that they can. If you men can't show the people of your own home town that you are entitled to the business, you're a bunch of pikers. You fellows can't sit in your easy chairs,

and expect the business to come to you . . . you've got to go out after it. Do that, and do it thoroughly, and you won't have any more funeral-ads, Mr. Baker."

Jason shook his head.

"That all sounds fine, young feller," he retorted, "But you're askin' a gosh-awful lot o' action from a dead man, ain't y'u?"

Bender grinned. Jason had slipped a "smooth one" over on him, and he appreciated the old grocer's wit.

"You're not so dead as you were, Baker. You are beginning to show some signs of life. After tonight, I think things will be a bit different, on Main Street. Tomorrow morning may be a sort of resurrection morning for local business. Who knows?"

Jason struggled to his feet, and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Now, listen, young feller!" he rumbled, in his deep, gruff voice, "I'm toward you a lot like the Irishman said about the bull that tried to knock an engine off the track fer wavin' a red flag on the cow-ketcher. I like yer courage, but confound yer jedgment! When a feller will come into this man's town, and pull a stunt like you jist done, today, I give him credit fer havin' a lotta sand in his craw!

"Now, I don't know what yer game is; and I don't know how y'u figger we're gonna git all this business the postmaster's gettin'; but I got a hunch that yer comin' out o' this here meetin' on top the heap. What's more, you've got us thinkin', even if y'u had to make us mad, fust.

"The Bakers ain't the smartest folks in the world, but they know when they're licked; and I'm ready, right

now, to call yer bluff. If you've got anything to help us merchants, we want it. So, you just git busy, and start resurrectin' us with yer new ideas; and we'll play with you, just as long as you don't git to goin' too fast."

Turning from Bender to his fellow merchants, Jason went on:

"I've been doin' a heap o' thinkin' since I see the paper tonight, gents; and I'm convinced that Bender's got the goods on us. Far be it from Jason Baker to bawl out a boy fer tellin' the truth. But, from now on, I'm gonna start lettin' myself soak up some new idears about business. And I'm gonna tie to Bender fer jist one year. Whatever he says, in reason, I'm gonna try. And I want you fellers to do the same thing. Let's give the kid a chanct fer jist one year. Then if I ain't sellin' more groceries than I ever did before, be-gosh, I'll boot him outa town, and I don't mean mebbe."

That broke up the meeting. The other merchants walked out in a daze. Bender pinched himself, secretly, to prove that he was awake. But, when all had gone save Crandall, the old grocer turned his grey eyes upon the druggist, a twinkle plainly visible in spite of his sober face.

"I guess Bender rather called your bluff, didn't he, Jason?" jeered Crandall.

Jason nodded.

"Yep. But *you* didn't run nothin' over on me, you tin-horn pill-roller," he retorted. "The best of it is that I called *yore* bluff, and you didn't know it. I didn't get yore drift at fust; but it didn't take me long to get yore drift at fust; but when I see Bender come

through that door, it didn't take me long to figger things out. Git up in the mornin', boy, the next time you try monkeyin' with Old Jason. And, remember, Tom . . . tomorrow mornin's resurrection mornin' fer *you*, too!"

Chapter VI.

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING.

JASON BAKER'S sole hypocrisy in life consisted in his claim that he was a Democrat; for, if ever there was an autocrat among his fellows, on any country town Main Street, Jason was one. It did not take Bender long to assure himself that when Jason had told the other merchants that he was going to "tie to Bender fer jist one year," he had spoken for them all; and, when he had given them to understand that he wanted them to do the same thing . . . well, Jason was the voting majority in matters mercantile in Pomoroy.

"There's two classes of business men in Pomoroy," was Tom Crandall's way of saying it. "Those who follow Jason's suit . . . and those who don't dare to cross him. Jason seldom sets his foot down, but when he does, his word's law."

So it was that, in securing Jason Baker's endorsement for a one-year trial, Bender had been placed on general probation. Now, it was up to him to make good, and he had just one year in which to do so. Which suited Bender perfectly. If he couldn't make good in a year, he should be "booted out of town."

In high spirits, Bender set out the following morning, to make his "killing" on Main Street. His first victim was none other than the sturdy Jason Baker, himself.

Jason heard Bender through, without a word. Eagerly and with enthusiasm, Bender laid his plans before the old grocer; how necessary it was that Pomoroy should "put herself upon the map;" how he expected to make the new "*Pomoroy Pilot*" live up to all that the name implied; how the paper must be assured of a certain volume of advertising patronage from the local merchants in order that he be released from a week-to-week struggle with the cash register to devote his energies to the civic betterment of the community; and how he expected the merchants of the town to back his venture by contracting sufficient advertising space for the coming year to underwrite the business for his newspaper for just one year, while he must "make good" to their entire satisfaction. When he had completed his outline of the project, Jason gave him a level look, while he shook his head.

"I reckon, Bender, I gotta give you to understand that while I'm tyin' to y'u, as I said last night, I ain't figgerin' to ast the merchants of Pomoroy, includin' myself, to line yer nest fer y'u. We've got some other things besides advertisin' to worry about; don't fergit that. We gotta hustle our business; and it's up to you to do the same."

Benders' color rose a shade, as he caught Jason's meaning.

"I take it, then, that your assurance last night was merely a guarantee of your moral support?" he asked, while the crooked, zig-zag grin twisted his features into the self-mocking grimace.

Jason shifted, uneasily.

"Now, git me right, son!" he fenced. "I ain't expectin' anybuddy to do business on moral support, as you call it, any more than I do. That ain't the point. You gotta have advertisin'; and we've got to pay you for it, at so much an inch. I understand all that; and Jason Baker ain't hedgin' on buyin' advertisin' space, and payin' yer price fer it—if it's worth what it costs. But I gotta be sold; and so has the rest of the boys. That's *business;* and you aint no better'n the rest of us—so, jist git out and hustle fer yer business."

Bender's grin righted itself into a genuinely humorous, horizontal plane.

"You're right, Mr. Baker," he apologized. "And thanks for the tip. I *was* expecting too much for nothing."

Jason nodded, encouragingly.

"Don't never expect somethin' fer nothin', son," he advised. "Because, when you do, yer gonna be disappointed. It's seldom y'u git it; and, when y'u do, it's usu'lly worth jist about what y'u paid fer it."

Bender started for the door.

"I see very plainly that I'll have to think this thing through a little more thoroughly, Mr. Baker," he said. "I'll go back to the office and choose my ammunition a little more carefully."

Jason stopped him.

"Jist a minute, son. Fust of all, you ain't got my name right. *Mister Baker's* bin dead fer thirty year . . . *my* name's *Jason.* In the second place, I reckon you'll have some job linin' the boys up on a year's contract, right off the bat. They're bound to figger that it costs 'em too much to advertise, along with other

expenses. But, if you could figger out a way to git all the old, no-count bills collected that we've got on our books, I reckon you'd have business galore fer a year; and not nary a one of us old mossbacks but would trade a lot of our accounts fer advertisin' space, even-up."

Bender gave Jason a broad grin.

"*Now,* who is trying to bargain for something for nothing?" he chided.

Jason shrugged.

"*I* ain't drivin' no bargain; I'm jist givin' y'u an idear—that's all."

Bender returned to his office, his rugged features cramped in the grip of deep study. Jason *had* given him an idea; and, it was a winner, too, . . . if . . .

Slumping into his chair at the desk, he busied himself with pencil and paper for a few minutes. Then, calling Jay Nelson from his work at the stone, he ordered out a special form job, "special rush."

"I've got to have those contracts ready the first thing after lunch," he told his assistant. "Read the copy over, and tell me what you think of it."

Nelson squinted long, through his thick-lensed glasses, as he read Bender's scrawl, from beginning to end; then, turning his near-sighted gaze upon his chief, he remarked, with characteristic bluntness.

"I'd say, since you ask me, that any merchant would be a fool not to take a proposition of that kind; but, how in heck do you expect to get *yours?*"

Bender smiled.

"You remember the story I told you about old Sol Ebell, don't you?"

Jay nodded.

"We'll, Old Lady Gossip was his undoing; but she's not going to put any whizzers over on me. Before a month goes over my head, Mr. Nelson, I'll have a nice business booked for the rest of the year—and *Gossip* is going to be my star salesman, or I'm a liar."

Chapter VII.

A GOOD SENSE OF RUMOR

THINGS were doing something in Pomoroy which they hadn't been guilty of doing for years. They were *happening*. They had been doing so ever since Bender had come to town; and Pomoroy was both glad and sorry. Glad, because she had something to talk about; sorry, because Bender had told her that he would not be ignored—and had proceeded to make the threat good. Pomoroy had done her level best to take Bender as a matter of course for nearly a month; but she was now obliged to admit defeat. He just would not let her forget that he was there.

But that was not the half of it. Much as she would have preferred to consider herself at odds with this new city upstart, she now found herself lined up with him—and all over nothing at all. From the very first, Bender's new paper had blossomed out with an editorial column, the like of which King County had never known. In this section, Bender's bare-fisted fearlessness of expression was already winning him a reputation in the locality, while it was drawing fire from his contemporaries of nearby towns.

Last week, the Bluemont ball team had come to Pomoroy, and gone back with a terrible score against them. As usual, the Bluemont "Tribune" had come out with its unsportsmanlike charges of favoritism on the

part of the umpire, as an alibi for Pomoroy's victory on the diamond. This was Bluemont's editorial style, of some years' standing; and it had never been called into question. But Bender promptly retorted in no uncertain terms, branded the Bluemont "Tribune" as a "poor loser," and advised the Pomoroy Independents to, thereafter, refuse to schedule any more games with such "sobbers". And, in spite of herself, Pomoroy found herself rolling up her sleeves, preparatory to backing up anything and everything that Bender had said. For the first time, in many years, Pomoroy was sensitive to those inward pulsations of pride which are ever the earmarks of the neighborhood where people are neighbors. Bender had wisely sounded certain human depths, and played upon sentiments which had long been dead in Pomoroy, with the result that over night she was ready to go to the mat for her own—even though it be nothing more vital than a ball game. Bender would yet prove his secret suspicion that Pomoroy possessed her normal quota of human stuff . . . and that she would demonstrate it, if given sufficient cause. Whatever she might think of her editor, personally, she would rally to a battle call—even from him. So, Bender dropped his grievance with the "Tribune" and smiled.

Nor was the "Pilot's" unusual character confined to its editorial columns, alone. On the contrary, more talked-of than these were the advertisements which the Pomoroy merchants were boldly displaying before their public. These were not the little, dinky, two-by-four "ads" which Pomoroy had memorized twenty years ago. They were *real* "ads", like one might expect to see in the Capitol City dailies. Why, Tom Crandall had ac-

tually run a *sale;* and Jason Baker was featuring "Saturday Specials," precisely like the big town merchants of Capitol City. They must be spending money like drunken sailors! Bender certainly had them hypnotised.

And, now, Pomoroy was all agog, for the "Pilot" had just made another announcement of something most unusual. Pomoroy was to be honored with a visit from some mysterious character from the mysterious nowhere, whose antecedents were as strictly secret as the purpose of his mission. Who he was, and what his business, no one knew. Beyond the meagre facts, that the gentleman would probably remain in Pomoroy for some time, that he would arrive the following Tuesday, and that he would be easily identified at all times by a most unusual garb—beyond these, Pomoroy was left to guess for herself.

This gentleman, whom Bender had called "The Man With The Red Suit", would reveal himself as just *that* . . . a man to be known at all times by his crimson wardrobe. This, Pomoroy was told, was his method of enforcing the public prominence which was his due; for the "Man With The Red Suit" was destined to become a very important personage in the affairs of Pomoroy and King County. His was a mission of unusual moment to the people of the community, in which it was vital that he be readily recognized when appearing in public. He was to be a public figure, in other words; and much depended upon his identity being universally established. Anyone wishing to make his acquaintance should arrange to meet the Tuesday morning train.

When Tuesday morning train-time arrived, the greater part of Pomoroy was present at the depot to receive the gentleman of note, for considerable popular curiosity had been aroused, and some preparation had been made for his coming. The Ladies' Aid Society had actually discussed his probable purposes, at the Friday session; and it had been the opinion of the majority that the unusual guest would inevitably turn out to be some sort of salesman, intent upon the maximum of publicity on behalf of his wares. Whatever his line, whether vacuum cleaners, aluminum ware or portrait enlargements, he must have the backing of the Ladies' Aid Society, if he would get far in Pomoroy; so the Society cleared its decks of unfinished business, for purposes of entertaining his royal highness at the next meeting; and, incidentally, at the same time, they would expect to entertain his best profit sharing proposition. Dad Shanks, being less modern in his calculations than the ladies, was forced to admit, for once, that he had no clue as to the stranger's mission in Pomoroy; but he "lowed" that if it were "twenty year ago," he'd turn out to be a "lightnin' rod salesman, b'gosh."

As a reception, the greeting of the "Man With The Red Suit" was a disappointment to Pomoroy's expectant crowd. True enough, he was all he had been represented to be, in appearance, for as he stepped from coach to platform, he stood revealed to them all, resplendent in red. Not alone his coat, vest and trousers—his hat, his collar, his tie, shirt, shoes and hosiery—all were a bright, glaring, crimson hue. Yes, he was all he had been represented; but, beyond this, he still remained as completely a mystery as he had been before. For,

without a word to anyone, he slipped quickly through the throng to an automobile, bowed to the people with a smile, and was whisked away to the choicest suite of guest rooms to be found in the Windsor Hotel.

No more was to be seen of him that day; but, the following day, and Thursday, the "Crimson Rambler" (as Dad Shanks had named him) was seen strolling up and down the streets of Pomoroy, bearing in his hands a sheaf of red papers, apparently checking house-numbers, but saying nothing more enlightening to Pomoroy's curiosity than chance remarks concerning the weather.

Dad Shanks, unable to muzzle his inquisitive nature longer, stopped him on Main Street Thursday afternoon, planted himself squarely in the stranger's path, and asked him, point-blank, what his business might be.

"Well," smiled the crimson gentleman, "I *might* be selling lightning rods—but, I'm not!"

And Dad was left with that, to wonder who had told the newcomer of his suspicions. Dad hated gossipers who couldn't keeps things to themselves. You just naturally couldn't say anything about anybody in Pomoroy, without someone tattling it back to the first party.

There was more than the usual anticipation in evidence at the Post Office, Thursday evening, while Pomoroy waited for the "Pilot" to be distributed with the last mail. Even Main Street was not above betraying interest in the answer to the mystery. Everyone agreed with Glenn Darling, who frankly confessed that he was literally "burning up" to find out what the "gag" was all about.

The particular degrees Fahrenheit which Pomoroy suffered in her curiosity were, however, decidedly frigid as compared with her temperature upon reading the following item of information in the "Pilot," which came into her hands in due time. There it was, on the front page, in bold type, under a blazing headline: CITIZENS OF POMOROY! ATTENTION!

> Much popular curiosity is being expressed in and around Pomoroy, regarding the "Crimson Rambler", and his business in the community. Permit me to announce that mine is an errand which is bound to be of paramount interest to many people in this locality.
>
> Very briefly, there have been turned over to me, for purposes of collection, a considerable sum-total of accounts, small, great and intermediate, which the merchants of Pomoroy have been carrying on their books in vain, against certain people in King County.
>
> "It is, accordingly, my duty to see that all possible haste is made in carrying out this work. Those receiving my statement through the same mail delivery in which this notice will be received may see fit to co-operate with me by sending their remittances to me at the Windsor Hotel. Anyone not replying to such statements before next Monday morning may expect a call from me at their homes. No one need require me to establish further credentials, as my attire will be sufficient identification. Sincerely at your service, (Signed) THE CRIMSON RAMBLER.

Pomoroy, with one accord, suffered a sinking of the heart, as she glanced at the unopened envelope which had been delivered with the paper. It had no return address; but, through the innocent, semi-transparent

whiteness of the envelope one could see a faint tinge as of red, within. And, likewise with one accord, she stuffed the thing in her pocket, preferring to open her mail within the sanctity of her own home.

Glenn Darling whistled softly, under his breath; then, a grin spreading over his face, he struck out from the Post Office door on a bee-line for Crandall's drug store. There, he found the druggist at his desk in the back room, wrestling with a task which had come to be hateful to him, above all things. Tom Crandall was trying to "line up" his advertising copy for the following week's "Pilot." Consequently, he did not resent Darling's intrusion as an excuse to put off this grim duty of Business, as Business was coming to be Pomoroy.

"Look here, Thomas," blurted out the young attorney, "I've been throttling my confounded curiosity about carryings-on in this town just about as long as I'm going to. Here, you merchants have been advertising like Wrigley—something you *never* did, before —yet, you haven't put me wise yet as to what the big idea might be. That isn't enough—keeping me in suspense, after all I did to conspire with you to drag Bender into your meeting that night—but Bender can bring a whatizzit in red pants into town, and you just sit back and see me eat my heart out, and say nothing. For heaven's sake, Tom, have a heart! What's the big idea anyhow?"

Crandall shrugged his shoulders.

"I can answer only the half of it, Glenn," he answered, "And *that's* a long story. Much as it pains me to admit having been hooked, hamstrung and hog-tied by a city slicker, I'm ready to confess that I'm

obligated to advertise for a *whole year*. As for the mission of this noble Red Man, I'm as much in the dark as you are; but I see no connection."

Darling shook his head, refusing to be satisfied.

"There's a connection, all right," he maintained, "I feel it in my bones. But, suppose you tell me about this advertising business, and maybe I can get the low down on the *other* half of the double mystery."

Crandall drew a legal looking document from a pigeonhole in his desk, and handed it to Darling, who read it through, as Crandall talked.

"One morning, a day or two after the meeting at Jason's store, Bender came breezing in here, and told me, straight from the shoulder that he was here to write up my advertising contract for the next year. Yes sir! And he didn't bat an eye while he said it, either. Then he asked me how many old accounts I had on my books that I hadn't been able to collect from people still living in the community. I told him about three hundred and fifty dollars. He sits right down, writes up the contract for three hundred and fifty dollars worth of advertising, as you see by that copy, receipted it 'paid in full,' and all I had to do to pay for all that space was just to assign to him all claim in those accounts.

"Of course, it looked good to me, and I jumped at the chance to get something for nothing. Who wouldn't? It was my chance to get something out of accounts that I had long since given up as worthless. About a week ago he told me that every merchant in town had contracted on the same basis. Now, he has his paper all sold out for a year, nicely; and all he has to do is to

collect about fourteen thousand dollars worth of bum bills, and he'll be all set. Now, Mister Darling, you've been such an admirer of Bender's financial genius, maybe you can tell me how he is going to come out whole on such a fool proposition."

Darling was laughing.

"I think I can!" he retorted, "And he'll do it, too, don't you forget it! Why, the nervy son-of-a-gun! I *told* you there was a connection between that meeting and this Crimson Rambler of his! Listen!

"Bender faces the whole bunch of you hidebound merchants and tells you to get busy and advertise. Of course, you won't do it. But he *makes* you bite by offering you something for nothing. Now, he has you all tied up tighter than a drum on an iron-clad contract, for fourteen thousand dollars worth of advertising space, and he takes your bad bills in payment for same.

"All right. Now, he brings in the Man-With-the-Red-Suit. That gentleman is going out to collect those bills. Just cast your eyes over this, will you!"

Darling thrust a copy of the "Pilot" under Crandall's nose. The druggist read the bold article carefully and silently, and read it again before replying.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" he exclaimed, "That's what I'd call strategy, and I don't mean maybe! If that man ever stops at one door in Pomoroy it will be peddled all over town—and everybody knows it, too! Ah, yes; I begin to see now how Bender is going to get his money after all!"

Darling, who had been reading the contract over again, was still laughing softly.

"Yes, and I see where *you* are going to advertise, too!" he jeered. "Why man, do you know that you are bound to *use* that space? If you don't, Bender has the privilege of coming right into your store and putting on a sale for you, without asking your permission or your assistance."

Crandall grinned wryly.

"Oh yes! I know all that, but that's exactly what I am *not* going to let him do! Darling, I'm going to be a good boy and get out my advertising real regular. I had one dose of letting Bender arrange my ad for me, *Never again!* But you don't need to rub it in. I know when I'm licked. Gosh, how I hate to write advertising copy!"

* * *

Friday morning wrought a transformation in the conscience of that faction in Pomoroy which had been favored with an invitation from the "Crimson Rambler." As he strolled along the streets of the village there was scarcely a pair of lace curtains commanding a view of the street through which one or more pairs of anxious eyes did not peer. Some of them expressed sentiments of terror, lest the much-feared stranger might call at the door; others were expectant in the hope that he *might* call at the door of another. Dame Gossip was determined to serve Bender well, without realizing the service she was rendering.

Within a week the Crimson Rambler was in high glee. His collection percentage was mounting in magnitude—easy money! The cash, and faithful promises of more cash, were coming to him in every mail—enclosed in envelopes bearing no return addresses. For the first

time Pomoroy was more than anxious to pay her bills, and Bender was at the receiving end. His plan had worked beautifully. Already more than ten thousand dollars in cash or promissory notes reposed to his credit in the bank, and the Crimson Rambler had not been obliged to make a single call as yet.

Friday morning of the following week Jason and Tom Crandall stood in the latter's doorway discussing Bender's latest "stunt" and commenting upon the shrewdness with which he had planned the scheme.

"He'll do!" was Crandall's opinion. "He's high powered, but I'll tell the world he's got plenty of those things that make the best fiddle-strings!"

Jason nodded thoughtfully, as he watched the figure of a young woman approaching the door of the "Pilot" office.

"Bender's all right," he agreed. "Mebbe he's a bit fast fer us mossbacks, but he's got something that most young fellers ain't got. He's got hoss sense. But, say! What do you s'pose my gal, Bobbie's, gotta see Bender fer?"

Crandall had also been watching the young woman who had just disappeared through the door of Bender's editorial stronghold.

"That's what I was just wondering! Maybe she has something to be published in the paper."

Jason shook his head.

"I reckon it's more pussonal than that. When Bobbie walks fast like that with her head in the air, like a race horse jist goin' onto the track, there's trouble in the air. She ain't gonna give Bender anything in the way of news—not if I know anything about

war! I'd sonner think she was gonna give him a piece of her mind, and, if that's the case—well—! He ain't gonna have such a sweet session as he had at my store that night. Bobbie's mad, clear through, and whatever she's got on her chest, Bender's gonna git—both barrels."

Crandall chuckled.

"I certainly hope so!" he remarked fervently. "He started out giving us fellows fits. Now he's out to scalp the poor deadbeats among the honorable citizenry of Pomoroy to pay his bills for the next year. It's no more than fair that he get his share of the razzberries, I'd say."

Jason started his waddling way toward his own place of business at the other end of the block.

"Wal, razzberries is Bobbie's favorite fruit when she's got blood in her eye; and she don't serve 'em up with cream an' sugar, neither! I *know*—I've et 'em myself!"

Chapter VIII.

ONE ROUND TO A DRAW.

BOBBIE BAKER constituted a conundrum which Pomoroy had long since given up trying to solve. She had begun life as a conundrum, and had never ceased being one. To tell the truth, no girl could have lived out her twenty-two years in a town like Pomoroy and succeed in keeping a boy's name from compromising her sex, without being a puzzle.

In order to appreciate Bobbie Baker it is necessary to understand the circumstances which bequeathed to her that masculine name. When Nature first assured Old Jason (not so old then, but no "spring chicken any more") that his unsatisfied longing to have someone call him "Daddy" would soon be filled, he rejoiced, even as Abraham of old rejoiced when he was promised a son to comfort his old age.

It was characteristic of Jason that, given an assurance of anything desirable, he should begin planning for the future. Accordingly, he began to dream of what his boy was going to be and do in the world. His son was going to be given a real, he-man start in life by being rightly named. His name would be Bob. Furthermore, he would live up to all that the Bakers had been before him. He would fight, and get his face dirty, and shoot spitballs in school, and wear out his pants sliding

down banisters. All that was ordered by Jason, in advance.

When the big night came, Jason paced up and down the long hall, his mind in a curiously blended state which was half joy and half misery—precisely as helpless under such circumstances as fathers have been ever since Eden. Then, the mystic drama over, the doctor appeared with a smile.

"It's a girl!" he announced.

Jason, striding toward him, all questions, stopped short with sagging jaw, and never did Doc Pitman know how near he came to losing his front teeth by violence.

"A *girl!*" roared Jason, "You're a liar! He's a—— good Lord! A——*girl!*"

It took Jason the better part of the week to recover from the blow. Then, Baker stamina asserted itself again. Baker plans were not so easily spoiled; not even by such a technical matter as a discrepancy in sex! If *she* wasn't *him*, she was going to be a boy anyhow. And that was that. This, Jason emphatically placed upon official record a few days later when the physician declared the case dismissed, and prepared to inscribe the baby's name in the Family Bible.

"What is going to be her name, Jason?" he asked, with pen poised over the blank page.

"Her name is *Bob!*" was Jason's decree.

Protests arose from the doctor and wife alike, but to no avail. Her name was Bob, and that was all there was to it. This, of course, presented a professional problem to the doctor, and the ink dried in the pen while he wrinkled his brow in deep thought. Finally,

he dipped the point in the well again, and, with a flourishing hand, wrote:

"Roberta Louise Baker."

To the rest of the world, Jason's perversity was nothing more than a foolish whim; but to Jason, it was an inflexible Baker determination which refused to be balked in its purpose. Always when asked why he had done as he did he would merely say:

"Wal, there's some things the Lord does His way; an' it was His way to give me a girl when I'd ordered a boy. But there's some things I do *my* way, so I jist named her Bob."

Through the twenty-one years that had followed, even up to now, Jason had continued to fight manfully against the edicts of Providence, with all the persistence of his Yankee spunk. It afforded him not a little satisfaction to note that his was not altogether a losing fight either, for while the Almighty had seen to it that those womanly traits so essential to the feminine best had been properly developed, Jason had succeeded in modifying what might have been an extremely feminine nature with some rather masculine viewpoints, and just a tinge of man-psychology. The net result of this feud now asserted itself in a very womanly young woman who would never become a clinging vine, richly endowed with Baker courage and Baker sense, plus the Baker style of thinking and talking straight.

Probably because she was a Baker, Bobbie had never bewailed her father's stubbornness in giving her a boy's name. She had done just as one would expect a Baker to do. She had proven herself a good sport by accepting a trying situation, and showing the world how

proud she was of it. One would almost have thought that she was sorry for the disappointment which she had caused her father that first night, and that she had determined to spend the rest of her life in making amends for her blunder, by being as near what her father wished her to be without doing the impossible. Only those who had heard Jason talk of his daughter could know how well she had succeeded in fulfilling his hopes. Now, in his declining years, it was Jason himself, who devoutly thanked the Creator for having changed his prenatal order, for having but the one child, Jason could truthfully say that Bobbie was both son and daughter to him.

How a young man like Bender and a young woman like Bobbie could have lived for more than a month in a town like Pomoroy without having met is another one of those happenings in life which are so hard to believe. Bender had heard of her of course, but being a man's man and very busy, he had allowed her no more than a passing thought. Bobbie, likewise, had heard of Bender; in fact, Jason had spoken of him often. What was more, Bobbie had reason to believe that Jason thought well of him, too. Perhaps she would do likewise when she should chance to meet him; but not being interested in men, sufficient for her, unto the day, was the evil thereof.

But now, it was different, as she hurried down Main Street toward the Pilot office, and there were little pink blossoms in her cheeks, of deeper dye than her customary schoolgirl complexion. Jason had guessed aright. Something had happened to make her very desirous of meeting Bender—and, when Bobbie Baker

was determined to meet anyone, there was going to be a meeting—head-on!

Bender, seated at his battered editorial desk, glanced up as the door opened and beheld a vision of female beauty which was altogether the most soothing influence which his eyes had ever felt—despite the fact that a pair of normally brown eyes were almost black in their intensity of feeling. The slightly gathered brows advertised very plainly just what the nature of that feeling was. Looking straight at him, her cherry lips drawn in a straight line, she spoke in a low, tremulous voice:

"Mr. Bender, I believe."

She might have been speaking to a keeper in a zoo, inquiring, "A baboon, I believe," for judging from her manner, he was the precise equivalent to some such creature in her opinion at that moment. In spite of himself, Bender felt his face redden. He nodded, but said nothing, which was the worst thing he could have done.

"Perhaps you will explain this!" she suggested frigidly, as she tossed a red paper upon the proof-reader's table.

Bender picked it up, glancing at the name.

"You are not Miss Herndon, surely?" he asked, incredulously, looking keenly at her.

"Miss Herndon is a friend of mine," she replied. "But that is of no consequence. The fact is that Miss Herndon is not accustomed to receiving such—ah—*literature* through the mail. Perhaps you can explain yourself."

Bender flushed angrily. What was she trying to do—bawl him out?

"The evidence would seem to indicate that it were up to Miss Herndon to do the explaining in this case," he retorted evenly.

Bobbie tapped the floor suggestively with the toe of her exquisitely shod foot.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" she exclaimed, "I might have expected some such sort of comeback from *you!* Don't you know that it is always the part of a gentleman to start making alibis when a woman goes on a tantrum?"

Bender shot her a quick, questioning glance. But there was not a single sign of mirth in her flushed features.

"I see no reason for alibis," he answered soberly, and added, boldly, "And a woman is no more terrible than a mere man to one who is fortunate enough to be a bachelor."

Bobbie bit her lip. This blue-eyed young man was turning out to be all that her father had described him to be—"all fire and onions!" She must retreat from her present position and give excuse for "laughing it off" as gracefully as possible. Indicating the red paper in his hand, she asked:

"What kind of trick do you call this? Blackmail?"

Again, Bender did a bold thing. He leaned slightly toward her as he answered, with a grin spreading from ear to ear:

"No, unless I'm colorblind; this happens to be—*red!*"

Bobbie tilted her head back and gave utterance to a full-throated ripple of laughter.

"That's better," she said a moment later, "and you *are* a gentleman! Now, I don't have to apologize for

starting something I couldn't finish. Father told me that you didn't bawl out very easily, but I had to find that out for myself. We Bakers have that way about us."

Bender's eyes quickened with understanding.

"So, you are Miss Baker!" he guessed.

Bobbie flushed at the recollection that she had not introduced herself.

"I suppose that explains everything," she challenged.

Bender nodded, smiling as he returned her gaze.

"It does," he agreed.

All clouds gone, Bobbie quietly accepted the chair he offered her and sat facing Bender across the proof-reader's table.

"Forgive my rudeness," he began, but she cut him short.

"Fifty-fifty folly requires no forgiveness."

Bender grinned. Her philosophical retorts were refreshing, they sounded so manlike in their directness.

"Now about this business at hand," she went on, "Miss Herndon is very much put out about the Crimson Rambler and his red-letter methods in Pomoroy. This bill is one which you apparently picked up to apply on Josh Warner's advertising contract?"

Again Bender grinned.

"You know about that?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Father told me all about it. He tells me all about his business affairs, you know, and really, Father thought you were quite clever. In fact, he thinks you are a most unusual young man."

"I hope that he shall not be disappointed in whatever confidence he may repose in me," said Bender, more

soberly. "It is going to require a lot of faith on the part of the merchants of Pomoroy to do what I shall require of them during the next year. But—as you say—about this business at hand?"

Bobbie's face added just a shade of pink. This was no easy thing for a Baker to do—asking a favor when a bluff had failed. But Baker "spunk" triumphed in the straight gaze with which she regarded him. Perhaps there was something in a peculiar combination of red hair and blue eyes that appealed to Baker sentiments.

"As I said before, when Miss Herndon received this statement with its threat of a personal call from your Crimson Rambler, she did not relish the idea. In fact, she was in tears this morning when she came running over to my house to tell me about it. Ordinarily, I don't go on a tantrum without counting ten, but in this case, I went off on snap-judgment, I think.

"You know, Josh Warner has a lot of failings, and among the worst of them is his perfect memory in matters of what is owed him, and his terrible forgetfulness of what people pay him, plus his natural conviction that he is always right. It is true that Dot owed him this amount once, but she declares positively that she paid it, and Dot wouldn't lie. When she could have paid it again she wouldn't, because she had paid it once. So she ignored Warner's statements after she had argued with him once in vain, trying to convince him that it had been paid. Now she would gladly pay it again, rather than have that Crimson Rambler person calling at her door, but she can't."

Bender was listening seriously.

"That is not necessary," he decided, referring to the statement long enough to mark it "cancelled;" then —"If Miss Herndon declares that she paid it and you confirm her word as being reliable, we shall forget it. You may tell the lady to dismiss the red goblin from her dreams tonight."

Bobbie was about to rise, with an expression of thanks for Bender's kindness, but Bender went on:

"Pardon me for being over-curious, but tell me. Just why should a proud daughter of Jason Baker, the autocrat of Pomoroy, come to the humble editor of the village paper, asking a favor for someone who cannot pay a bill which was once paid, but never receipted?"

Bobbie met the questioning blue-eyed gaze, decided there was nothing but honest curiosity there—and something else that she could not define, but which was entirely satisfactory to her, whatever it was—before she tarried to answer.

"Because," and her chin was elevated just a trifle, "Because, Dot is my friend—my very nearest and dearest friend, outside the family—and, when someone hurts a friend of a Baker, the Bakers are ready to fight."

Bender's blue-eyed study persisted, as he followed up with another question.

"Won't you tell me about this lady—this friend of yours? You interest me, for a newspaper man is always open to interest where a story in involved."

Bobbie favored him with another probing look.

"In other words—gossip?" she countered, with a peculiar bite in her tone.

"Not at all," he assured her, "I merely gathered from your remarks that Miss Herndon might need assistance of some sort—employment, perhaps? If so, I just thought I might—"

Miss Baker's suspicion dropped instantly.

"Your guess is exact," she confessed eagerly. "You see, Dot's never had a chance here in Pomoroy. She came here about six years ago. From where, I do not know. Her past, before coming to Pomoroy, is as much a mystery to me as to anyone else in Pomoroy; but," she added, almost spitefully, "It never bothered me to know all about it like it has some others around here.

"Just because Dot has never chosen to tell all about herself there has never been any room for her in Pomoroy. Really, I'm her only friend, and why she stays here I never could understand. I've tried to coax her to go to the city. She's a first-class stenographer, and she has a fine education, too. But for some reason she will not leave Pomoroy. She will not even go with me on a shopping trip to Capitol City.

"Of course these people around here all say she *must* have a *past*, and they shun her as they would a leper. As if there weren't a few regiments of skeletons in the closets of their own homes. How Dot stands up under it, and why, is more than I can understand; but she insists upon staying in Pomoroy nevertheless.

"When she first came here she took a position in Kessler's real estate office, and we became acquainted through her coming to Father's store. She lives alone in two little rooms upstairs in Mrs. Graham's house, and no one ever visits her except Mrs. Graham on the first of each month. She has told me so. Poor Dot!

Everything seemed to go well enough until Mr. Kessler moved his office to Cascade. He wanted Dot to go with him but she wouldn't. She stayed right here, and now, for the past year, she has managed to barely live by taking odd jobs, all the way from acting as public stenographer to helping out during house-cleaning time.

"I've wanted to help her but she won't have it. Dot's proud as Lucifer! If she thinks anyone is trying to do her a favor she won't have anything to do with it. That is why she wouldn't come up here to see you herself. You would have to take her word for the truth and she wouldn't ask that."

Bobbie paused and shook her head sadly.

"Dot's an awful problem. If you think a Baker is stiff in the bit, you ought to know her. But she's such a good kid, and I know that she has suffered a lot in her life. She hasn't told me, but I have read it in her eyes many times. Whatever her past, shouldn't she be given a square deal? Oh, I think it simply horrid that people in this town who pose as being such model Christians should act like so many Pharisees. Believe me, that old deacon who stood up and thanked God that he wasn't like the poor publican has a lot of direct descendants in this part of the country!"

Bender laughed outright, though he had been watching her soberly up to the moment of her last statement.

"Amen!" he agreed. "If you were a man, I'd ask you to shake on that."

Bobbie smiled at that. It had been said so sincerely and unpremeditatedly, and she liked it.

"Dot's—Miss Herndon's story is most interesting," he went on. "But what has me guessing is this: what has she ever done for you that you should take such a concern in her?"

Again Bobbie looked at him uncertainly. He was becoming rather *personal.*

"Why—I—nothing that I know of," she answered, hesitatingly. "I have always felt so sorry for her, because she has always been so much alone and friendless —and she's such a good kid at heart. I never expected her to do anything for me. I love her as a friend, just for what *she is,* not for what she has *done*—if you know what I mean."

It was doubtful whether Bender really did know what she meant, for his eyes were set dreamily upon Dad Shanks' dandelion pasture, dimly visible at the other end of Main Street.

"*That's friendship—real friendship!*" he murmured, more to himself than to her. Bobbie had a feeling that he had forgotten her, in some freakish line of thought which was intense in its grip upon him. But it was apparent that he had not forgotten her, for he turned again and fastened her with that blue-eyed gaze in which an indefinable something — was it hunger? — was so plainly visible.

"You remind me of something which I read only last night," he was saying. "I always read a few chapters from my Bible before retiring, and what you have just said confirms something which I never expected to find in real life."

Bender produced a little leather-bound volume from his pocket. It was much thumbed and the binding

had given away in sections which had been most thumbed.

"*For the Son of Man,*" he read aloud, "*Is come to seek and to save that which was lost.*"

While she watched him, in frank astonishment, he turned quickly to another passage:

"*Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*"

As Bender looked up to meet her surprised gaze, a faint smile softened his rather hard features.

"I thank you, Miss Baker, for having furnished me a rare specimen. I shall place it in my private museum of impossible ideals! A friendship which reaches out and embraces another, not for what another has *done*, but for what that other *is*—that's the genuine article. That's the Christlike sort—and I had thought there was no more of it in real life. Again, if you were a man, I'd say 'shake'!"

Bobbie gasped. This was becoming too personal for first acquaintance—even for a Baker! And goodness knows a Baker could go a long way from the conventional without misgivings!

"But, surely, you have friendships!" she cried, seeking to bring the conversation back to beaten paths. "Why, Father says that the merchants all swear by you now, and that you have everyone coming your way. And you must have friends where you came from—boyhood pals, and—"

At this point Bender did an amazing thing. He raised one arm as if to ward off a blow—he actually seemed to cringe as before a clubbed weapon. As he

sprang to his feet, a look, as that of a creature mortally hurt, flashed into the blue eyes.

"Don't! Please don't!" he begged, and paced about the small room, gripped as if in some terrible storm of feelings.

It was very brief. Scarcely a minute passed before Bender had gained control of himself again, and sat facing Bobbie across the table. An apologetic smile played upon his features. Not a trace of that hurt look could be found.

"Forgive me," said he, in a low voice. "You know, I'm a downright weakling on some points—and this is one of them. If there is anything in God's world for which I have longed, it is that I might have just one real *friend*.

"Oh, I have friends," he added, almost impatiently, "After the commonly accepted specifications of friendship. There are some whom I have favored or served, and who regard some obligation to me for what I have done. But that is not friendship such as I just read to you about. *That's* what I mean. And *that's* the sort of friend which you are to your friends—you'll fight for them."

Bobbie smiled at him something that was almost tender in its sympathy. He was so much a man on the surface—yet such a mere boy at heart—just a heart-hungry boy.

"Such friends," he went on, "I have never known. I think I'd go through hell for just one friend like that. Would you mind telling me how such friends are made?"

She shook her head. There was something pathetic in his simple frankness—so strangely out of place in

company with the six-feet-four of him, his red hair, that square, aggressive chin, and those blue eyes that could be so hard at times.

"Such friendships are not made," she answered, "They just come—like flowers and fruit. We can cultivate them or neglect them as we choose, but they are not *made* by hand, or by any process of chemistry. We only plant the seed and leave the rest to Nature."

Bender was leaning toward her eagerly.

"And how may one plant the seed?" he asked.

"By being one's self," she answered.

For a long time he sat looking toward Dad Shank's dandelions again. Then with a shrug of the broad shoulders:

"School's out!" he laughed, "It isn't wise for beginners to be kept too long hours at the desk, is it?"

Bobbie had risen from her chair as a sign of departure.

"Just a moment, please," he pleaded. "Do I understand that your friend, Miss Herndon, would welcome steady employment at her own profession?"

Bobbie's eyes lighted up.

"Indeed she would!" she cried. "You don't mean—"

"That is precisely what I mean," interrupted Bender, in a very businesslike manner. "I have been wanting clerical assistance in this junk-heap of an office for weeks. I should thank you kindly if you would inform Miss Herndon that I have a place for her services if she is all you say she is."

Jason Baker's daughter was moved to do a most unladylike thing. She stepped boldly up to this strange young man and extended her hand quite frankly.

"Even though I do happen to be a woman, suppose we *do* shake," she suggested.

Had Pomoroy but witnessed the ceremony it would have been unanimously decided that Bender held her hand entirely too long, but since they two were the sole parties present, it was no one's affair. Nor did anyone overhear Bender's reply to Bobbie's assertion that Dorothy Herndon was a very "lucky girl."

"Yes," agreed Bender, looking down into the dark eyes that returned his gaze so frankly, "I'll tell the world she's a lucky girl. Anyone who has friends to fight for him is the luckiest fellow in the world."

Bobbie had caught the subtle change of gender, but she waited until she had closed the door behind her before she smiled. As she hurried toward Dorothy Herndon's two little rooms, Bobbie Baker's thoughts were busy with this newest of Pomoroy's puzzles. He was a most remarkable person, indeed.

"Billy Bender," she whispered, "If you want friends who will fight for you, just try being yourself for a few months in Pomoroy. In fact, I'm not so sure that you haven't one already. But it will be some time before I tell you about it! When one is as clever as Billy Bender, it is not too much to ask that he find out some things for himself without being told."

Chapter IX.

A MATTER OF COMPETITION.

MAIN STREET was glum. It was Blue Monday again—the seventh since she had begun to advertise—and it hadn't worked. Tom Crandall had claimed some increase in business and was inclined to believe that in time better results would be realized. Jason Baker wasn't quite so sure about the increase, and he was frankly dubious about the future. As for the rest—well, it just didn't pay to advertise. Advertising was all right for big town stores and cut-rate stores of established reputation for bargain-counters, but in Pomoroy—well, *their* business was *different*.

Already Bender sensed a growing tendency toward laxness on the part of certain merchants. They were growing lazy about their "copy." Late copy had come to be a problem with him. In vain did he remind them on their contract which bound them to a fulfillment of their part of the bargain. It was no fun—this writing of advertising which brought no results—and Bender would have to be satisfied with his copy when he got it and not before. If he didn't like it—

That was that. And no one knew better than Bender that something had to be done, and that promptly. Accordingly he did as he usually did in times of trouble. He sought out old Jason Baker and discussed the

matter with him. And, as usual, Jason was not to be caught without some ideas of his own upon the subject.

"It's the wimmin—plague take 'em!" he growled. "Ever since they got the right to vote an' begun to bob their hair and' got to bossin' the spendin' of the family money, they've bin raisin' Cain with business. It's the wimmin that does the buyin' now-days, and don't you forgit it. And, when y'u start out edicatin' the wimmin, you got a job on yer hands, and I don't mean jist about, neither.

"Did y'u ever try drivin' pigs into a gate?" he asked.

Bender admitted that he had never had that doubtful pleasure.

"Wal," went on the old grocer, "Fur be it from me to find fault with the Lord's doin's. I got myself into a peck o' trouble one time doin' jist that. But I allus did say that when the Lord made His fust pigs, He shore made a mistake. He put the head on the wrong end. You jist natcherly cain't drive 'em head fust into anything. If you do git 'em into their place, they're bound to be hind-end before."

Bender grinned. Jason's philosophies of life were always refreshing to him.

"Now when y'u try to tell a woman what she's got to do or what she's s'posed to do, she's gonna butt right in on y'u and tell y'u to take a jump in the rain-barrel. She's got her own idears, and right er wrong, she's gonna have her way about it. What she wants now-days at the counter is *price*. You kin talk quality till yer black in the face an' after yer all through she'll ast y'u how much it is. And when y'u tell her, she'll declare up

an' down she gits jist as good from Chicago at half that price.

"That's woman fer y'u, son. It's price—price—price! Nothin' else counts. Onless y'u got somethin' to sell at half-price, er give away, y'u don't need to advertise because someone else that sells a seven-cent value fer nine cents ag'in what you've got that's better fer a dime is gonna git her trade because he's a cent cheaper. Now, son, I know how to handle pigs, but wimmin's got me stumped. What are y'u gonna do about it?—eh?"

Bender had been doing some rapid thinking.

"Jason, you're partly right and partly wrong. I remember reading in Genesis that when Adam was called on the carpet for eating apples out of season he blamed the woman for it. And ever since, when something goes wrong, the blame is always placed on '*The Woman Thou Gavest Me.*' You know, and I know, Jason, that the farmer is just as hot for cut-throat bargains as his wife is. It just happens that *your* customers are largely women, but the hardware merchant, who sells to a greater percentage of men, will tell you that the man is almost as frantic for bargain-baits as his wife."

Jason shook his head. A Baker did not change his mind easily.

"Mebbe so, but I've noticed it takes you bachelors to tell us old bucks how to handle the wimmin. Mebbe it's time to call a showdown with the public; I donno. But one thing I know, and that's this: *Folks is crazy about price, and until you work on that, y'u ain't gonna git to fust base.*"

Bender had been thinking the same thing, but had sought confirmation of an authority before putting his plan into execution. Now that he had it, he determined to call for the "showdown"—a term which Jason had taken from his own lips. Accordingly, King County was hard hit the following Thursday evening when an editorial which King County interpreted as decidedly "personal" greeted the eyes of the Pilot's readers.

It was an article which none other than Bender could have been responsible for, and designed to raise the ire of those whom it criticised. The closing paragraphs were the most severe. They read thus:

> "When an American, professing faith in the principles of Independence, turns his back upon local Independents in Business to patronize the syndicate houses outside, he must have some very sound reasons for his action, or stand accused of commercial treason!
>
> "There are scores of farmers (both re-tired, and just plain 'tired') in this community who persist in buying their merchandise anywhere but at home, on the claim that they can 'do better' elsewhere. We challenge this statement, as a sum-total proposition; but, that is beside the point! The fact remains that even if you farmers *can* 'do better' somewhere else—that, still, is no excuse for your disloyalty to this community.
>
> "If you don't like Pomoroy's merchants—if they don't give you the service, selections, or quality that you must have—fire them! BUT DON'T BE DISLOYAL TO THIS TOWN! We can get along without any merchant in Pomoroy! There isn't a man of Main Street that can't be replaced. BUT YOU FARMERS CAN'T GET ALONG WITHOUT POMOROY!

"Here is the Pilot's proposition: If you want better merchants in Pomoroy, we shall make our business men come up to your standards, or import others to replace them who will! There are plenty of Merchants to be secured; but WE HAVE ONLY ONE POMOROY!

"This is an open letter to every farmer and farmer's club in King County; We remind you farmers that you want financial support, in loans, and banking considerations, from this town! We recall that this town is good enough for you when you need QUICK SERVICE! Then we submit that it is entitled to your ENTIRE PATRONAGE; and anything short of that is downright un-American disloyalty, and deserves public condemnation as such!

"If we are wrong, we invite correction in just as strong terms as we employ. You farmers don't need to think that you can turn up your noses at Pomoroy, and get away with it! If it demands a showdown with you, Pomoroy is prepared to give you farmers a lesson you will never forget! Now, come on with your excuses and alibis; and, if you have the nerve to do it, serve your ultimatum on this town. We shall publish it in the paper, in order that Pomoroy may know your terms of peace! This town wants to know what you farmers expect of her; and, by the powers, she has a right to know! Now, Mister Farmer, we are awaiting your reply in writing! If you be half an American, and half a man, such a challenge will get under your skin. If this doesn't secure a response from you, we shall know your calibre; and Pomoroy shall feel justified in giving you up as hopeless, and closing her doors to you, when she is forced to do so, or when she sees fit to do so! Address your replies to the editor, personally."

Main Street read the editorial with a quaking which was inward pain. She felt a little sick at the pit of the stomach. But the farmers of King County were as directly and visibly affected in a different way. Some fumed, others exploded, and a few began to do some serious, constructive thinking. The King County Co-Operative Association took the question up at a meeting of the Board of Directors. On or two were in favor of ignoring the thrust, but such an action was not to be thought of, since the Manager had received a copy with Bender's personal compliments. It was up to him to make some reply. So after a two-hour wrangle, in with a minority contended that the editor was right, and a majority held stubbornly that everyone had a "right to trade where they pleased," the following reply from the Manager was authorized:

"Dear Editor: Your challenge of the practice, current among local farmers, in placing their patronage in those places where they believe their best economic interests to be best served, has been deemed by our Board as worthy of reply, in precisely the terms which you have employed. Accordingly, our Board has voted the following resolution:

"Every American enjoys the liberty of conducting his own affairs as he sees fit. The farmers of King County refuse to stand mute, when accused of disloyalty to Pomoroy. On the other hand, our conception of Pomoroy is entirely incorporated in our treatment at the hands of Pomoroy's Merchants. If Pomoroy wants our patronage, she must prove her claim to it by serving us just as well as those outside, at prices comparable with what our merchandise costs us delivered from outside.

"We do not propose to enter into any lengthy discussion of the matter. We choose, rather to state

> our ultimatum, as you suggest, in three words: *COMPETE OR QUIT!* Until those terms are fulfilled by the Merchants of Pomoroy, the farmers of King County will choose their own course; and, any unsolicited advice or criticism from your paper will, hereafter, be completely ignored as the prattlings of an irresponsible child who is crying for the moon! Yours respectfully, etc."

Bender, sitting at his desk, read the retort for the third time. It was only one of a score or more, but it was by all odds the best. Yes, he would publish the letter, complete—by George! He would have it photographed and run the exact reproduction of letterhead and all on the front page of the next issue of the Pilot.

The old, crooked, sidelong grin slid across his rugged features, to the left jaw.

"Jason was right," he murmured to himself. "It's got to be a showdown, and I've got one up my sleeve that will bring these farmer lads to their knees in a hurry, or my name isn't Billy Bender. Pomoroy, my girl, get ready for some big doings. You are about to be put on the map, for before we are done with this, they are going to be reading about you in every corner of the state."

Bender was gazing at three words in capitals before him.

"Compete or quit, eh? A large order, I'd say—especially in view of the fact that we are *not going to quit.*"

Chapter X.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

POMOROY certainly was having her troubles. Ever since Bender had come to town, life had been just one unbroken nightmare of insoluble mysteries. Golfsticks and bloomers—funeral editions—a new paper—a man with a red suit—all these and minor curiosities had taken their respective turns in torturing her mind. Then, there had been Bender's hiring of that "topsy-headed Herndon girl." That didn't *look* just right. Of course, they seemed to behave themselves all right around the office (Pomoroy had watched that, supposedly unknown to either of the victims of her espionage), but still one can never tell what young folks *might* do.

You see, this Herndon girl was still unknown in Pomoroy, after some years of local residence. Pomoroy had done her part in trying to become confidential with the girl, but the yellow-haired lady had very calmly repulsed all advances, in a most dignified manner, and persisted in remaining the mystery which still bewildered any attempt to penetrate her "past." Therefore, under the moral code of the Social Sanhedrin, Dorothy Herndon had become an outcast, not because of what was known about her, but because of what was *not* known but very easily suspected.

So, remembering the old slogan that "gentlemen prefer blondes," and recalling the fact that Bender was, if not really handsome, then certainly cast of a mould designed to capture the attentions of "the sex"—reviewing all this, Pomoroy repeated that it didn't *look* just right for Bender to hire the Herndon girl as his secretary.

There were some, of course, who placed no significance upon Bender's employment of Pomoroy's only available stenographer, and there was *one* who *did*, in a very constructive manner. Glenn Darling had long since been interested in things outside the practice of law (*Business* and *Politics*, for instance), but now he began studying a new subject for thought. This subject came in the form of a semi-scientific phenomenon which, of late, bothered him not a little. He had always supposed that blondes of such a decided shade were the result of peroxide, but now that he had given the matter a more intensive study, he had already formed a theory that, while such things usually *were* made, they *might* be born that way, too.

Lest it be thought that Darling had forsaken his two former hobbies for a whim far separated from the others, be it understood that this study of yellow hair was not so far removed, in his calculations, from *Business* and *Politics* as might be supposed. The more he saw of her and the more he tried to engage her in conversation, the more convinced he became that his amateur knowledge of these two subjects might be of vital importance in aiding him to attain a very desirable position of which he had, of late, allowed himself to dream. One thing must be said of Dorothy Herndon:

she was *all business*—and it did not require all Glenn Darling's natural keenness of mind to realize the importance of exercising much of that diplomacy which is supposed to make for "good politics" if he were to get far in the estimations of a certain decided blonde.

To say that Dorothy Herndon was a *decided* blonde is an ambiguous statement, as Bender had already learned, after scarcely more than a week's experience as her employer. Decisions were things which Dorothy had a capacity of making—on a production basis. She had not been a member of the Pilot staff more than fifteen minutes before she had already made a number of decisions, all of which she had kept to herself until they had been executed. Now that they were done, Bender had looked over the transformation with an astonishment that was almost a feeling of awe. The dirty windows had been washed and graced with dainty curtains; the floor had been subjected to the first scrubbing it had received since Sol Ebell's coming to Pomoroy; desks were now in order, and all files brought up to a standard of tidiness and accuracy, which was downright sacrilege against the traditions which had been established through past years in this editorial sanctum. Bender sensed, rather than analyzed, the atmosphere which had been newly created in the place. It were as if the old, slovenly, haphazard spirit of Sol Ebell, and all those little devils and hobgoblins of sloth, pettiness and pious devotion to the things of yesterday, had been bundled into one coterie of familiar spirits, and banished from the place, at the business end of Dorothy's broom! Now, as he looked it all over, and pronounced it precisely the thing he had wanted with-

out knowing it, Bender wondered whether the Pilot had annexed Dorothy Herndon, or whether this yellow-haired girl had not in reality annexed the pilot.

Bender sat long at his desk in silent contemplation of the peroxide bob, now studiously bent over the ledger in an effort to untangle one of Bender's hopelessly muddled entries, and almost reached a conclusion when an interruption breezed in.

"Hello, folks! Fine day—well, I'll be darned!"

The interruption stopped short, just inside the door, and viewed the Pilot's interior transformation with startled eyes; and to judge from the cool, none-too-interested glance of the baby-blue eyes that peered from beneath the yellow hair, Glenn Darling represented nothing in Dorothy Herndon's life beyond just that—an "interruption," which might be more or less annoying, depending upon the amount of work to be done.

Darling sauntered about the office, feasting his eyes upon the fresh environment where cobwebs had been wont to gather, with an occasional glance at the cause of it all now busy at her books.

"Some change, Bender!" he congratulated, "I always *did* say that all one had to do, when he felt his faith in miracles weakening, was to turn a woman loose with a broom and mop in a bachelor's quarters."

The facetious one caught the look of withering scorn, shot at him by the one whom he had attempted to praise, decided that he had fumbled a delicate situation, and wisely refrained from making it worse by any corrections. Darling dropped the matter right there, and turned his back upon the ungrateful blonde of his dreams. Whatever might be said against him, Glenn

Darling *did* have character—and will-power. And one might have thought the subject of yellow hair entirely banished from his mind, as he tossed a leg across the corner of the proof-table and sat facing Bender.

"Say, Old-timer, do you know you've got little, old Pomoroy all up in the air again?" he inquired, accusingly.

Bender's brows took on an interrogative lift.

"Is that so? What now?" he asked.

Darling frowned his dislike for such "beating about the bush."

"Come off with that noise," he growled, "you know what I'm talking about. It's this ultimatum you have thrown down to the people of the county who send their money outside instead of buying at home. You've bit off a pretty big bite, Billy-Boy; do you think you'll get away with it?"

Bender smiled ever so little as he handed his caller the letter which he had received only that morning.

"Read that. Then, if I don't get away with it I'll expect you to have an ambulance ready for me at the door the moment my first year is up in Pomoroy."

Darling scanned the message.

"Holy mackerel!" he whistled. "In other words, it's up to you to *put up* or *shut up*."

"Exactly."

This called for a cigarette to inspire thought before Darling could continue.

"Well, I've never heard of you shutting up before, and we *have* seen you *put* up a few times already. So I infer you have something up your sleeve. What's your game, Bender?"

Evidently, Darling was more than casually interested in the plan which he suspected Bender of entertaining, whatever it might be; but it was also apparent that Bender was not to be so easily drawn into confidence.

"Yes," he agreed, "I *have* something up my sleeve, but I have always found it wise to keep my ideas there until they are ripe for public consumption."

Darling expelled a cloud of blue-gray smoke in a snort of annoyance.

"Listen here, old man," he demanded, in a low, tense voice, "you aren't such a darned big mystery with me as you are to the rest of the natives around here. I knew you before you ever came to this town. I know all about the big milk scandal and Haine's game that was spoiled by a red-headed, hatchet-faced butt-insky on the News. Maybe you think you've got a monopoly on all the brains that Pomoroy was ever guilty of entertaining, but I claim you've got another think coming. Say, where would you be today in this town if you hadn't stepped in on that merchant meeting at Jason Baker's that night? Answer me that, will you?"

Bender shrugged his shoulders.

"That *did* simplify things a lot," he admitted.

"Who was it put you wise, and prodded you into going over?" persisted Darling, in growing triumph.

"That *was* your doing, come to think of it," grinned Bender, "and it was both clever of you and lucky for me. Do you mean to tell me that you did it to help me out of a tight place?"

Darling flipped his cigarette into the corner, much to the disgust of one whose esteem he coveted; but this being an instance in which ignorance was bliss, Darling

replied without noting the suggestive action when Dorothy placed a cuspidor for his convenience.

"Oh, no! I was just that blood-thirsty, I was hoping they would string you up by yours heels and feed you to the grasshoppers," he scoffed.

"Look here, Bender," he went on, hotly, as the editor failed to make reply, "I'm for you, and I want to see you win out in this fight."

"*What fight?*" interrupted Bender quickly, with a searching look at his visitor.

"Oh, I don't know *what* fight it will turn into—but it's a fight already. You can't kid me that things can be peaceful around a burg like this with a fire-eater like you spilling eight pages of type a week in the neighborhood. *What* fight? That's what I'm trying to find out, you poor ham—if you'll only tell me. Come on out with it. I'm throwing in with you if you give me a chance. Surely two heads are better than one if one *is* a red-head and the other a block-head."

A pair of blue eyes behind him silently told him to his back that he had just uttered the first wise statement he had made since coming into the place. But Bender was still unmoved.

"It is true that I have a fight on my hands here," he confessed, slowly and thoughtfully. "A bigger fight than you or anyone else knows anything about. And I'll probably lose, too. But that is no excuse for forming friendships and alliances which may make trouble later. I'm something of a 'lone-wolf,' Darling, if you know what I mean. Confiding my schemes to another has never been a practice with me, and I am slow to start it now."

Then Darling did something which turned the tide in his favor. He dropped a strong, friendly hand on Bender's broad shoulder while he smiled reassuringly into Bender's very face.

"Yes, but you never had such a fight on your hands as you have now, either," he argued, "and if you play your cards right you'll win out. Why, man, you've done this town a world of good already, but she doesn't know it. I can just begin to see things as you have seen them for a long, long time. This town, like thousands of others like it, is doomed unless something is done to wake the public up to the situation. And you're just the chap who can do it, too—the one out of all the hundred millions in America.

"But, Billy, you'll have to begin building up an organization—a machine like they have in politics—if you are going to put the job over. You can't do it alone, and poor support is better than none at all. Right now you're up a tree—*I* know! You've got a scheme in mind, but it's going to be too much for you to swing. You need a lieutenant—and I'm here to nominate a Darling for a candidate. Then if it's someone with courage and nerve that you need, why—just knock the 'ell' out of him and you have 'Daring.' "

Bender laughed. Something in this energetic, almost fragile fellow, with his gift of gaining one's confidence, had long appealed to him. He decided to take a chance.

"You win!" he surrendered, extending his hand. "From now on, until further notice, consider yourself the unofficial right-hand bower of Bender Incorporated. You are right when you say that I need some assistance. Right now I've got to line up the merchants of Pomoroy

on a public educational campaign which is going to raise particular pandemonium in King County. Now listen closely as I outline it to you."

Without further formality Bender launched into a detailed description of his plan of "campaign," and without a word to interrupt, Darling listened with all the attention of which his gluttonous ears were capable. When Bender had finished, and not until then, Darling gave vent to an appreciative, if explosive, comment.

"Shades of Ticonderoga!" he exclaimed. "Talk about *nerve*—say, you take the galvanized pancakes. Wow! Maybe that won't teach these natives, who learn their golden texts from a catalogue, a lesson. But—gosh!"

Something had just occurred to Darling's active mind, and a look of dismay crept into his eyes.

"Say, Pomoroy isn't *enough*," he cried. "Why, we've got to line up Bluemont and Cascade and Stanwood and Beulah—if we don't, we'll fall flat. You don't mean that you'll include *them*, too?"

Bender nodded, a lazy smile playing about his mouth.

"Exactly. That is where *you* are coming in on this, Glenn. I want you to go along with me down Main Street here in Pomoroy. Watch me whip these fellows into line. See how I do it; what arguments I use; what methods I employ. Then while I go north into Bluemont and Beulah, it will be up to you to swing the boys in Cascade and Stanwood behind us. Get me?"

Darling nodded.

"*Get* you? Why man, I'm 'way ahead of you. Come on, let's storm this bunch of has-been's. Then, with them all tied up, we'll go out and enlist the Never-Wuzzers in our noble army. Hot Dawg! Right here's

where this little Darling is going to begin really enjoying life. Bye-bye, Dorothy, dear. Maybe when I come back from battle and *our* boss begins pinning the medals upon my noble breast you'll be willing then to call me by my last name without any 'Mister' tacked on ahead of it, like a cow-catcher that catches everything else but cows."

It had been a long time since Dorothy Herndon had betrayed any such emotions as confusion, but her gasp, at his audacity, caused Bender to turn his back for a grin. Why not? Stranger things *had* happened.

Chapter XI.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING.

BENDER'S scathing editorial, championing Main Street and Pomoroy as properly entitled to first place in the shopper's considerations, had not been published in vain. For, while the majority was inclined to resent what they chose to interpret as meddling with the private and personal rights of the individual to trade where he pleased, there was, at the same time, the inevitable minority which agreed with him. But both sides were unanimous in their opinion that Bender's cause was hopeless; that, if people insisted upon trading elsewhere, nothing could possibly change them.

"Any feller with red blood in his carcass jist cain't help likin' Bender," declared Dad Shanks a day or two later, while the regiment of leisure sat in discussion of the matter on the shady side of the street in the heat of the day. "Doggone him fer a fire-eater, anyhow. When I'm lookin' fer a real he-man, give me one that says what he believes, if the whole world's ag'in him."

Thus it was that whatever popular resentment which might have been entertained toward Bender, because of his imagined attempt at interference with private liberties, was tempered with an equally popular respect for the man himself. Even those who disagreed with him,

and who had felt most keenly the sting of his criticism, readily voted him their personal, if silent, admiration.

Then came the point-blank retort and ultimatum from the farmer's organization, which Bender had published the week following. Hundreds had read it, and not one had failed to catch the challenge of those three words: "COMPETE OR QUIT!" Milton Harris, whose typewriter had clicked off the original letter, reproduction of which had been printed upon the Pilot's front page, received more than one compliment from the ranks of the criticised. Milt had certainly "put it up to Bender," and no mistake. There were others who shared Glenn Darling's view, that it was now up to Bender to "put up or shut up."

This clash between Bender and Harris received more than mere passing notice from the public for two reasons: First, because the issue was a timely one upon which more or less discussion had been created for several years; and, second, because the two figures involved were outstanding ones in the community. Bender had, first of all, ably demonstrated his ability to fight his own battles, even during his short sojourn in Pomoroy. Harris, on the other hand, was "nobody's fool." He was well read and educated far beyond the average of Pomoroy's people. In fact, the Superintendent of Schools, and possibly one of the local pastors, were the only men in the community who could show a better academic record than Harris'. More than that, Milton Harris was outspoken in his opinions, and no mean antagonist in debate. Had Pomoroy been choosing two rivals for just such an engagement as this, she could not have selected a more evenly-matched pair. Now she

was waiting for them to "go to it"—and it was Bender's next move.

Just what Bender was going to do about it, Pomoroy knew nothing beyond the editor's statement in reply to Harris' ultimatum, that the Merchants of Main Street would be expected to fill his order, but that Bender would not ask them to "quit." It was up to Pomoroy's local business men to "compete," and there was more than one hunch that Bender was not to be caught without some means of achieving just such an end.

Dad Shanks was not more inquisitive than the rest of Pomoroy. He merely possessed more courage than the rest, and less delicacy. So it was he who attempted to draw from Bender a hint as to what the next development might be.

Dad's opportunity to question the editor as to his plans came one morning, as he met Bender in the doorway of Jason's grocery. Fixing the younger man with shrewd, gray eyes, he inquired, "Wal, young feller, don't you reckon you've kept us guessin' jist about long enough?"

"Guessing, about what?"

Bender's attempt at innocence aroused the irascible old-timer.

"Say, yer about the durndest tightwad I ever see, when it comes to talkin'," he rasped, in his asthmatic voice. "You know blamed well what I mean. What y'u gonna do about the way Milt Harris called yer bluff last week? Didn't expect to git hit quite so straight between the eyes, did y'u, eh?"

Bender laughed.

"Mr. Harris *is* rather outspoken," he admitted. But I like a man like that. They're so rare in Pomoroy."

Dad stroked his beard reflectively. That last remark suggested a subtle meaning to his prying brain. What was the young snipe getting at, anyhow?

"M-m-huh. Mebbe so, he conceded, doubtfully. But, anyhow, you gotta hand it to Milt fer callin' his cards."

"I *do*."

"Wal, what you gonna do about it? Make these here mossback merchants compete? Why, they ain't had a new idear fer forty year."

Bender looked down into the wrinkled face, so laden with sentiments of curiosity, and smiled broadly.

"You'd be surprised," was the editor's reply.

Nothing slipped past Dad's quick eye easily. He caught the knowing look which Bender shot at Jason, who stood in the doorway, his broad expanse of apron gleaming in the morning sun. He also detected an easy, self-assurance in Bender's grin; and Jason's evident enjoyment of the questioner's unsatisfied inquiry struck Dad as suggestively in keeping with a conspiracy.

That afternoon, Dad joined the daily convention of the group of grizzled loafers who populated the hotel veranda on hot afternoons when the wind was in the right direction. It was inevitable that he should introduce, as an item of unfinished business, the much-discussed tiff between Bender and Harris.

"Milt sure hit the nail on the head," was the comment of one member of the jury. "You gotta hand it to Milt. He's got the nerve to call a bluff when he sees it."

Dad grunted.

"Yeah. But it takes jist such a hot-head as Milt Harris to go off half-cocked, and this is once when he done it. He *thought* he was callin' a bluff, when he wrote that letter to Bender; but don't kid yerself! Bender ain't the bluffin' kind."

Dad spat copiously into the dusty street.

"Don't worry about that young feller," he went on. "He's been on the road! And he's been up against wuss propositions than Milt Harris, too, er I'm a liar. Say, jist who *is* Milt Harris, anyhow? What did he ever do, outside a yappin'? Tell me that."

Another member shook his head.

"Reckon Milt's all right," he defended. "Leastways, he knows how to take keer o' himself in an argymint. He's a right smart feller, Milt is."

Dad squinted angrily at the speaker.

"*Izzat so?* Say, lemme tell *you* somethin', Hank. Milt's got a good eddication, if that's what you mean; but I ain't never heard nobuddy git up in testimony meetin' an' say he had so much *brains!* Jist wait 'till Bender starts workin' his guns . . . an' you'll see Milt Harris shot full a holes. Don't ast me how I *know*, neither . . . I jist know, that's all. Milt's got *nerve;* I'll grant you that. But, so's Bender. An' Milt's swallered a dictonary er two; but Bender's got more *new* words in his paper every week than I ever seed before. Now, when it comes to *brains* . . . wal! Bender kin talk in his sleep an' say things Milt Harris never thought of."

Of course, such indefensible treason to Pomoroy's intellectual farm leader could not hope to pass the convention in the form of a resolution; but Dad's inferred

acquaintance with certain inside information served to shake, somewhat, the popular confidence in Harris' position. Maybe Bender *would* surprise them. Certainly, they could not deny Dad's reminder that he had been doing just that very consistently ever since he had come to town.

"I reckon you never thought of this," suggested Dad, as a closing argument to support his views. "S'pose Bender's got it all figgered out how he's gonna kick Milt's crutches out from in under him. All right. Now, he's waitin' to see which side the public's on. If they're fer Harris and his bunch, then *they'll* git the whole works, too. Me . . . I ain't wantin' none o' Bender's medicine. In the fust place, his pills are allus so all-fired, tarnation bitter that you haffta take wormwood afterwards, to take the taste outa yer mouth. In the second place, he don't never put no sugar coatin' on the outside of 'em."

Meanwhile, Pomoroy had made note of certain strange goings-on. The merchants were becoming more and more unwilling to enter into discussions of "competition" with the mail-order houses. Whatever one might say about the farmers' ultimatum and Bender's "bluff", Main Street maintained a stubborn silence. But this was not all. Bender and Glenn Darling were to be seen much, of late, in company. Then, Bender had been reported several times as seen in Bluemont and Beulah. Rumor had it that there had been a secret business men's conference in each place, with Bender in charge of the ceremonies. While this was going on, young Darling had appeared to have sudden business interests in Cascade and Stanwood. Then, someone from Cascade had

declared that the hotel proprietor there had told him that a group of merchants from the latter two towns had met in a private room with Bender one night, and the meeting had not dismissed until nearly midnight.

Among the curious, Milt Harris, alone, refused to become wrought up to any degree.

"We farmers have Bender squirming," he had repeatedly declared, when asked about the latest developments. "It is bad enough when we *have* to send away for merchandise, because the local merchants insist upon excessive profits. But, when they put someone else up to rake us over the coals for doing what we have a right to do, it comes high time to call a halt. That letter which I wrote Bender expressed the sentiments of us farmers perfectly; and we mean exactly what we say. Now, it's up to Bender to make good on his own, voluntary offer."

Dad Shanks had been eavesdropping during this expression, made in the depot, where Harris had gone for some Chicago freight. Now, he edged up to the speaker; and there was satisfaction in the purr which his asthma had brought into his voice.

"Wal, Milt, if he's so blame hard hit by yer letter, then why did he *print* it so prominent-like fer folks to read?"

Harris shrugged and grinned.

"Just another bluff," he suggested.

Dad grunted.

"I reckon there's bluffs . . . an' *bluffs*," he replied. "An' I've knowed fellers who thought they was safe, until they woke up that it was *them* who'd been bluffin'!

You don't reckon *you* bin doin' any bluffin', do y'u, Milt?"

Harris brought his fist down forcibly upon the agent's ticket window ledge.

"Not by a jug-full," he roared. We farmers know our business, and we don't propose to be browbeaten into submission for seeking our own welfare. If we can save money by sending away for our merchandise, it is our right and privilege to do so; and we brook no interference from any one . . . even Bender. If the merchants of this town are going to let him lead them around by the nose, and make goats of them, that is up to them; but we will not stand for any of his high-handed dictation, and we told him so in mighty few words. When the time comes that we can't buy where we please, and save where we can, it is going to be a rainy day in this town."

Dad made no reply. As he started toward the door, Zeb White was just entering.

"Where y'u goin', Shanks?" he asked.

Dad turned, and fixed Harris with a meaning look.

"I'm goin' home an' git my umbreller."

It was characteristic of Bender that he took his time in staging a "come-back", when such a performance was necessary. Reasoning from his point of view, Milt Harris carried no importance, individually, in this crisis. He was nothing more than the personification of King County. He had voiced the sentiments of King County on the question of home-trade; and King County, not Milt Harris, must be given a reply to the ultimatum. This reply would have to come in some form other than

words. It must be in action—on the well proven ground that actions speak louder than words.

The action began when the Pilot, three weeks after the publication of Milt Harris' letter, carried to the public the astonishing notice that the following Saturday would inaugurate a new merchandising policy in King County. Not only in Pomoroy, but in Beulah, Bluemont, Stanwood and Cascade, the merchants had mutually agreed to abide by the demand of the farmers. They would "compete" with their outside rivals upon an absolutely even basis.

"Bring your catalogue with you next Saturday!" urged the merchants in their advertising displays. "Prove for yourself that your local dealer *can* compete with his outside competitors. We guarantee to meet any price published in any catalogue, matching the merchandise quality-for-quality. All purchases will be made under catalogue terms of sale."

To back the merchants, an editorial of Bender's authorship was published in the Pilot, the Bluemont Times and the Cascade Banner.

"The new policy which takes effect Saturday morning throughout King County, comes not as a result of the best judgment of our merchants, but as an answer to a critical public," it was explained. "Our merchants have always maintained that the mail order system of operation in trade is basicly unsound. But the farmers and other consumers of King County think otherwise.

"The fact that the merchants should know more about business in the distribution of merchandise than the farmer means nothing in this case. *The public is boss in business;* and when the boss urges or demands

a certain course, that course must be followed, regardless of its folly.

"But when things go wrong as a result of following the public's demands, the public has no one to blame but itself. If you find that you like the new policy on Main Street in your nearest town, thank the farmers of King County in general, the King County Co-Operative Association in particular, and Milton Harris personally, for it. But if you find that it is not all you had hoped it might be, you know whom to blame. This new system is not our idea, nor the idea of the merchants. *It is the demand of the farmers, themselves.* Business is being done, after this, according to the policy which the farmers demand. When we promised the public that our merchants must fulfill the public demand, we were making no bluff. Time will tell whether the arbitrary demands of the farmers, as outlined by Mr. Harris, are sound or not. For the present, the only consideration is the ultimatum of the farmers. '*COMPETE OR QUIT!*' is the demand of the farmers. The merchants are going to COMPETE beginning next Saturday. This is done according to your orders, Mr. Farmer! If you don't like it, and you want to know who is to blame for it, just look into a full length mirror, and begin cussing the culprit to his face."

Dad Shanks read that Thursday evening edition through with utmost care. As he read the blazing announcements of the merchants, it looked to him that the new "system" held much promise of improvement. But, upon digesting Bender's editorial comments, he revised his opinions. Looking across the length of the front porch at his spouse who was engaged in the

rather homely but wholesome task of darning socks, he voiced a suggestion as was his right as the nominal head of the house.

"I reckon, Mandy, you better git yer Saturday's list ready yit tonight. I'll go up town in the mornin' and git what stuff we need fer next week, before this here new fangled system opens up. It jist don't look right to me."

Mandy expressed a contrary opinion, as was her right as the *real* head of the house.

"What? Buy tomorrow and pay higher prices? I should say not! We're gonna wait till Saturday, and git the sale prices! The way these stores have been chargin' us fer their stuff in the past is something terrible. It's about time they was brought down a peg er two; and I'm not goin' to give 'em the satisfaction of payin' the high prices tomorrow fer what I kin git cheaper Saturday!"

Dad struggled to his feet, with a grunt of disgust, and began trudging toward Main Street. Entering Jason Baker's grocery, he approached the proprietor.

"Say, Jase! I got a hunch."

Jason stroked his day's growth of beard.

"Yeah? Wal, that ain't yer fust one. You git hunches jist about as fast as rabbits hatch young 'uns. What's eatin' y'u?"

Dad squinted wisely at the old grocer.

"I bin tryin' to find out what yer game is in this here town, but I ain't got nowhere. Bender's runnin' yer stunt, whatever it is, and that's enough fer me. I don't trust that bird when he's out to scalp somebuddy. So you jist dig up our last Saturday's

order, an' fill it ag'in. I'll take it home tonight, and sneak it upstairs, after Mandy's went to bed . . . 'kase I ain't takin' no chances on my Sunday dinner. It's ag'in my religion to git reckless about my grub."

Jason grinned.

"Ain't you so keen about the new system that's goin' in on Saturday?"

"Mebbe I am; an' mebbe I ain't. I'll tell y'u better Monday. O' course, I 'gree with Milt Harris that competition's a good thing fer the public; but, then ag'in, there's sech a thing as too much of a good thing. And, say, Jase! Don't fergit to put some spinnach in with that order!"

* * * * *

Saturday morning's sun shone early upon a train of Pomoroy's townspeople making their way toward Main Street, prior to the washing of the breakfast dishes, to take advantage of the day's bargains before the farmer-folk could reach town and monopolize the counter frontage. What they beheld, upon their first glimpes of Main Street, served to dampen their hopes somewhat. For, not only were all store windows empty and untrimmed. They were positively untidy, cluttered up with refuse, such as one might see in a building which had been hastily vacated.

Nor was this the worst. Upon entering the respective places of trade, a depressing atmosphere oppressed the shopping spirits of Pomoroy. The empty windows were not so bad; but those stores were awful. Their emptiness was like that of a tomb. Shelves bare, counters and empty display cases pushed back against the walls . . . nothing in evidence, as working equipment, save

the cash register, an order pad and a box of nicely sharpened pencils. And, standing bored guard over it all was the proprietor.

The pitiful story was quickly told and understood. Did you wish something? Very well. Just write out your order, being careful to show all catalogue numbers, and the name of the firm publishing the catalogue. Also, exercise care in showing all sizes, colors, etc. Fill in the prices shown in your catalogue; and turn in your order at the cashier's booth.

Following the due course of routine, the customer was first subjected to long waiting in line for a chance at the order pads. Then, there was a long, tiresome study of the catalogue, and the making out of the order, while the crowd waiting its turn at the desk jostled about you. This done, at last, you turned your order over to the proprietor at the register, who totaled up the amounts. The total was so-and-so. Now, add two cents postage on the order going in; plus so much on the goods coming back; plus so much for the money order. Did you wish insurance on the goods? That would be so much. Grand total so much; and, of course, you *must* pay cash in advance.

Payment made for the total, the merchant calmly rang up the amount on his register, placed your order upon the spindle at his back, and turned to the next customer.

Hold on a moment! Didn't you get any "service" here? You want your merchandise, of course; and you tell the merchant as much. Very kindly and courteously, you are informed that it requires fully a week to secure delivery on a shipment from Chicago. Come back a

week from that day, and you would receive your merchandise . . . if it had arrived.

Of course, this is an outrage; and you want your money back. The merchant, very smilingly, assures you that all money will be promptly refunded if the transaction is not in every way satisfactory. But, of course, the order is now in the mail, along with the money order. It will require at least two weeks before actual refund can be made, as such things must follow their regular course in the routine of handling.

At first, Pomoroy was angered. But, upon calling at Warner's Market and being told to write out their orders, pay in advance, and come back a week later for their steaks, chops and ham, Pomoroy matrons cried out in rage that it was all a lot of "boloney", and went out not forgetting to slam the door behind them!

The day wore on; and with it the battle of words. Main Street was the front-line breastwork, over which the customer and the merchant exchanged verbal fire.

"Hang it all, Josh!" roared a farmer, one of the first to come in from the country side and learn of the unadvertised features of the new 'system'. "I've *gotta* have a beef roast. We're havin' a whole houseful o' company, tomorrow."

Josh fastened a baleful eye upon the irate son of the soil.

"Wal, this is what you farmers wanted. Now you got it. What y'u holler'n about, anyhow?" he asked.

"Thunder, man! Meat ain't *hardware*, even if it's jist as tough, sometimes! You cain't buy fresh meat from a catalogue!"

Josh waved him aside to make room for the next customer.

"You oughta thought o' that before!" he retorted. "This is a purty time o' day to git yer eyes open! Best way to learn such things is to learn it yerself! I tried to tell y'u a year ago, that what was good fer the hardware is good fer the meat market! *Now*, mebbe you'll see what I meant! Reckon you'll haffta kill some chickens, Joe!"

The farmer shook his head.

"Gosh! We sold all our young chickens. All we got is old birds, and they're tougher'n boiled owls."

Josh was enjoying the situation keenly. For the first time, he was telling the public where to get off at.

"You farmers have bin handin' us merchants some things in the past few years that's bin mighty tough chewin'!" he retorted, again. "Now, it's yore turn to chew, awhile! So, while yer chewin' some tough facts, y'u might as well chew some tough chicken, too! Variety's the spice o' life, you know."

By noon, the situation had become all but serious. A young couple, applying at Tom Crandall's for a brace of sodas, had paid in advance for the treats. Now, they must come back a week later, and partake of their ice cream. Dry goods, hardware, drugs, groceries, meats . . . everything, in fact, was included in the range of the "new system" of trade. Pomoroy's patrons, having had time to reflect upon their straits, began to realize the dilemma in which they had been placed.

Meanwhile, the sky had become overcast; and, now, a heavy downpour added to the general discomforture. Motorists, needing gasoline for their cars, were told at

the service station that all orders must be written out, and paid for in advance. Delivery would be made next Thursday—perhaps Wednesday. Automobiles became thirsty, and refused to go farther. Some, attempting to make the drive to nearby towns, became stalled along the road in the rain. Others, arriving in adjacent villages learned that the "new system" was in vogue there, as well. At the same time, Pomoroy's pandemonium was increased, as unsatisfied seekers of merchandise in other towns began wheezing into Main Street's maelstrom on their last pint of fuel.

Bender was enjoying the time of his life, in company with Glenn Darling. As the pair continued their rounds of Main Street, more than one vengeful glance was hurled at their backs; but, apparently in blissful ignorance of it all, they added fuel to the fire by their unwhispered comments upon the situation. Gentle chaff brought volleys of wrathful retorts, more or less seasoned with profanity. The climax in vocabulary was reached about three o'clock in the afternoon when Milton Harris, himself, appeared upon the scene.

Milt had, by a cruel edict of Fate, discovered himself in possession of a robust toothache, that very morning. Delayed in his going to town by certain reverses on the farm (his hogs had broken through a fence, and refused to be driven from the cornfield in which they had made invasion), his right cheek had assumed nearly double its normal proportions by the time he arrived in Pomoroy.

Rushing into Crandall's Drug Store, he yelled. "Where's the dentist?"

"Home, probably," was Tom's answer.

"Why ain't he on the job?" complained Milton, lapsing into the ungrammatical usages of the community in his pain. "I've got a tooth that's got to come out. You couldn't phone him, could you?"

"Sure."

Two minutes later, Milton was informed that Burton would be at the office in an hour. With a muttered curse, Harris ordered a small bottle of sweet oil.

"I've got to get something to relieve this pain, until he comes."

Then did Harris learn the lesson that chickens *do* have a habit of coming home to roost. He might order the sweet oil, and pay for it now; but it wouldn't be delivered for a week. It required another five minutes for Crandall to explain it all to the distrought farmer. At last, it dawned upon Harris what had been done. His mind flashed something across the screen of his memory. It was a picture of old Dad Shanks in the depot.

"*I reckon there's bluffs—an' bluffs,*" the old loafer had said. "*You don't reckon you bin doin' any bluffin', do y'u, Milt?*"

So this was Benders' way of coming back, was it? And *he* had been unanimously elected as Bender's goat. Worse, still, Harris was obliged to admit to himself, that *he* had, *himself*, cast the sole electing ballot.

"Wal, Milt!" drawled a familiar voice, behind him.

It was Dad Shanks—the old weasel! Now, *he* would rub it in, as he always delighted in doing.

Harris turned upon Shanks, the angry set of his features the more distorted by the swollen condition of his face.

"I wuz jist thinkin', Milt," went on the speaker, "about what you sed, over to the depot. As I rec'lect it, you sed something about it bein' a rainy day in this yere town, when y'u couldn't buy where y'u pleased. Wal—it *is* rainin' quite han'some, ain't it? Never knowed you was a prophet, Milt."

With another muttered anathema, Harris started for the door. Shanks intercepted him with a spryness to which he was unused.

"Jist a minit, Milt! I reckon y'u ain't quite so chipper as you wuz before today, be you? Now, lissen to me. You jist trot along up to the dentist's offices, an' wait fer him to come. Then, when he gits there, y'u kin write out an order fer one tooth-pull, an' pay fer it. Then, come back about Friday, and mebbe yer pull will be here. Oh, yes. Ain't you Chicago-shoppin' farmers the wise guys? Ho-ho! You had Bender squirmin', eh? He was bluffin', eh? Now, you eddicated hair-trigger, it's *yore* turn to squirm, durn yer hide! You . . . "

More he would have said, had he not found himself forcibly draped over an empty rack, and his enraged audience gone. With Crandall's assistance, and much grunting on his own part, Dad Shanks finally extricated himself from the debris and gained his feet.

"Hit me, by gum!" he screamed in a spasm of rage. "An' me an old man, crowdin' eighty-two. Dad burn his wishbone! Jist wait! If I don't raise a knot on his head, it'll be bekase I ain't the man I usta be."

It was with utmost difficulty that Crandall finally succeeded in appeasing the octogenarian to a degree that permitted coherent speech.

"This isn't your fight, Dad," he soothed him. "What do you expect from a man with a tooth-ache? You *did* razz Milt pretty hard, you know; which you had no call to do."

Dad began to tremble, again in an excess of wrath.

"Oh, I ain't, ain't I? That's all you know about it. If it hadn't bin fer his bone-headedness, this never woulda happened!"

"What would never have happened?"

"Why, this here crazy mail-order bizness—and me, ketched clean, without nary another chaw o' tobaccer. Drat his hide!"

Crandall laughed.

"Is *that* all?" he jeered. "Just wait a minute, Dad! I'll fix that up for you."

The druggist disappeared in the rear room; and, after sounds of much rummaging in the basement, reappeared with a goodly supply of Dad's favorite weed.

"Here's enough for a month," he cheered, as Dad grinned his appreciation. "But, mind you! Not a word about this smuggling act of mine! This is against the law, you know!"

During this act of lawlessness, Dorothy Herndon was making the rounds of Main Street, dodging in and out of doorways while the downpour continued. At last, she found Bender and his lieutenant in Warner's Market. Quickly, she slipped him a yellow envelope.

"A telegram from Capitol City!" she panted. "Wilson just brought it over. He said it was important—and grinned. That always means bad news, you know."

Bender held the envelope unopened, as he looked down into the flushed face, beneath its yellow fluff, now some-

what bedraggled from the rain. Darling, conducting a side view study of her face, would have given his right arm to have her look at *him* like that.

Bender glanced at the message, and paled.

"Something wrong, Old Man?" inquired Darling, a note of anxiety in his voice.

"Worse than that! Haine's messing things up for us," growled Bender, between clenched teeth, as he handed Darling the wire. "You two beat it back to the office! I'll be along directly! Wait there for me; and not a word to anyone!"

Simply because it was her employer's instruction, Dorothy accepted the courtesy of Darling's umbrella, as they hurried back to the Pilot office, to await Bender's arrival.

"Golly, it must be serious," remarked Darling, as they minced their way among the pools of water splashing about their feet. Haine's sure poison to Bender. The old pickle-face!"

Dorothy caught her breath, as if with a shiver.

"Cold?" he asked, solicitously.

Dorothy's lip was caught between her teeth, as if she were holding back a sob.

"No-o-o!"

There was nothing more said; but Darling was quick to reflect that Bender's secretary must take his affairs to heart with a seriousness most unusual to secretaries. Slipping the telegram from its envelope, he scanned the lines,

"*Just got scoop on your game. Great story for Sunday. Old Nero out to break you. Be at Capitol*

Inn tonight at eleven. Will have whole dope for you. Conny."

Darling whistled, while Dorothy read the message over his arm.

"Who is 'Old Nero'?" she asked.

"That's our nickname for Jap Haine," he informed her. "He received that title several years ago, when his warehouse was burning, one night, and the firemen were trying to save the contents. Haine comes driving up in his big car, and tells 'em to let her burn. Then, he sat there and whistled a tune to himself while the works went up in smoke, just like Old Nero who fiddled while Rome burned. Ever since that time, the News boys have called him Old Nero."

Dorothy was wide-eyed.

"But, I don't understand!" she murmured. "Why should—Haine want to interfere with Mr. Bender's business?"

Darling was making the most of his opportunity. He appeared very ready to render information for his fair listener.

"Why shouldn't he? If *you* knew Haine like *I* know him, you wouldn't ask. Didn't he try to pull a little million dollar deal in milk in Capitol City a few years ago. If he had had his way, every little baby in the city would have had to be born in a rich family in order to have milk to drink. And he would have *had* his way, too, had not Bender butted in and spoiled it all. Oh, Haine's got good reason to bust Bender, all right; and that's what he is out to do. *You* don't know him, or you wouldn't ask."

Something like a sigh escaped Dorothy's lips. Darling, ever quick to catch signs and sounds which might furnish grounds for suspicion, glanced at her keenly.

"Say! You *don't* know Jap Haine, do you?" he asked suddenly.

They had just entered the office, now; and Dorothy had only hung her slicker to dry, when she turned away from him toward her desk.

"You'd be surprised!" she answered, with a queer, hard laugh.

Chapter XII.

FLINT AND STEEL.

A RAINY night of inky blackness settled upon the marooned spirits of Pomoroy; but not so depressingly as might have been feared. Things had gone wrong quite consistently with the would-be bargain hunters who had been so sadly disappointed in their high hopes for this new and widely advertised "mail-order system" of business; but the day had been another case of "all's well that ends well." For, despite the fact that they had been helpless in their plight; and, notwithstanding their final resignation to the inevitable ruin which the merchants' ruse must wreck upon the community's Sunday dinner; it had developed that these same merchants were not entirely inhuman after all.

When twilight descended, and when it had become apparent from the mighty wail that was now going up that the public had learned its lesson, a hurried conference took place among the merchants, and it was decided to lift the ban for just two hours. What a record breaking period of selling followed. Filling stations opened up; merchants led their customers into basements, opened cases, boxes and kegs, and began dealing out merchandise in astonishing volume. Ten o'clock saw public demand fairly well satisfied, and Pomoroy smiled again, in spite of the rain. After all, the merchants had shown themselves as "pretty decent

fellows." Pomoroy readily granted as much. Yes! She was learning rapidly, now that she had suffered some intensive instruction upon her own self-made basis of business.

But, if the public was pleased, the merchants were positively enthusiastic. The scheme had worked better than they had dared hope. They had long prayed for just such an opportunity to cram some of the public's injustice down the public's throat. This had now been done, without serious damage to their own standing in the public's good will, and they were more than pleased with the manner in which Bender's scheme had worked out. Of course, some of the folks had been "sore" at first; but this had passed, and everything would soon be forgotten, except the lesson which the public had learned. That would linger for time to come. Some of the day's incidents would go down in Pomoroy's pages of private history, most of them as jokes to be revived from time to time at some victim's expense. No one believed, for instance, that Harris would ever live to see the day when he would be permitted to forget a certain spectacular case of toothache.

It is a question of honest doubt whether Pomoroy's business men would have been so secure in their satisfaction over this sweet season of revenge, had they known of the dramatic battle which was being fought behind the scenes that night. For, while they were closing their stores, retiring to their respective homes, and long after stentorian snores had begun to rattle the dripping shingles upon Pomoroy's domestic roofs, Main Street's editor and chief-of-strategy sat in conference with a former comrade in a private room in the Capitol

Inn, grappling again with his old arch-enemy, Jasper Haine. And he who had long been an enemy of Bender's was now to become an enemy of Main Street, as if, by embracing Bender, Main Street had assumed all his enmities—among them, the mighty Jasper Haine. He, who had sworn to square accounts with the "young cub" who had dared to meddle in certain deep schemes in the past, was now intent upon striking a blow which would deal death to all that had been accomplished by Bender's clever ruse in Pomoroy. It was characteristic of Bender as a general that he would fight it out alone, while his soldiers secured their much needed sleep.

Jerry Connelly, better known as "Conny" among his friends and fellows of the News, had been pursuing his daily routine as a reporter early that day, when by chance he overheard in the lobby of the hotel a conversation between a salesman and his client.

"I ran across a pretty piece of business gossip yesterday afternoon," the salesman was saying. "I stopped off in Pomoroy to call on the trade. Now what fool stunt do you suppose the merchants of that town are up to?"

There followed a complete description of King County's proposed ruse.

"H'm," commented the salesman's companion. "That's interesting."

"Plain folly, I'd say," was the salesman's opinion. "Why, man, that just makes good advertising for the mail order houses."

"Don't be too sure of that," cautioned the other. "That isn't such a crazy stunt as one might think. But that isn't what interests me. What interests me is that I think I know who is behind that stunt."

The salesman laughed.

"Oh, I can tell you who is behind it. Some young newspaper man, by the name of Bender, if that means anything."

"Just as I thought," replied his companion. "Something tells me the Old Man will be interested in this, too. He's always interested where Bender is concerned. Say! It wouldn't be so nice for Bender, if the Orange Front Stores were to shoot in a bunch of general merchandise, and sell from side track, while this game is going on up there, would it?"

The salesman became uneasy.

"Maybe I shouldn't have said anything about it. This was told me in confidence."

His friend waved his fears aside.

"Don't worry! I won't give you away. Fact is, Haine's got a score to settle with Bender, and I'm partner in the ambition. Bender horned in on a game of ours one time; and we haven't forgotten it. Thanks for the tip, old man. I won't give you away, depend on that."

That had been the conversation, as Connelly had overheard it; and as the salesman's companion departed, the young reporter caught a full view of his face, and knew him. He had been the private secretary whom Haine had once used as his tool in the State Capitol during the notorious milk scandal in Capitol City; and it had been he whose political ambitions had been so early nipped in the bud by the dauntless Bender, while the latter had been a mere underling on the News staff.

That day had been a busy one for "Conny". By noon, he had learned enough to substantiate his fears; so he had wired to Bender. More he had discovered that afternoon. Now, he sat astride a chair in reverse position, his chin resting upon the high back, while he told Bender the whole story, which was so brief but so vitally important to the merchants of King County.

"Haine's out to get you, all right. Everything is all set. Monday morning, at seven o'clock, the Orange Front gang starts loading ten cars at the chain store's warehouse. Tuesday morning, those cars will be on side track in Pomoroy, Cascade, Stanwood, Bluemont and Beulah, filled with all kinds of merchandise to be sold from box car. Then, your merchants can take a jump in the lake. And you will look like two cents half spent."

Bender's old trick smile did its zig-zag stunt, leaving the rugged features twisted in an ironic cast.

"Like a big fool, I never counted Haine in on this," he mocked. And, if he puts this over on me, now, I'll hire you at a princely salary to take a day off and kick me all the way back to Pomoroy, to prove that I'm the biggest piece of dumbness outside of a home for the feeble minded."

Connelly grinned to himself. Bender never staged a "comeback" from a mistake of his own without first berating himself roundly for his own folly. That over, he would soon be in action. Shucks! This was all in a day's work for Bender. He'd find a way out . . . leave that to Billy!

For a long time, Bender sat in deep thought. Suddenly, he seized the telephone directory, found a number, reached for the instrument and placed his call.

"Hello! Belt Line? Let me talk with Tom Pierce! . . . oh, on the day side, now, eh?—I see. Well, let me speak with Fleming! (minute of silence) Hello, Fleming! Bender speaking,—Bender, formerly on the News,—say, Fleming, give me a tip, will you? Have you a spot order for cars to be placed tomorrow for loading at the Orange Front Warehouse? (minute of silence) Thanks, old man. Say, when will Pierce be down in the morning? . . . Doesn't work Sundays, eh? Has he a phone at his home?—Thanks, much! So long!"

While he waited for the operator to answer for a second call, Bender turned to Connelly.

"You had the dope, all right. . . . Yes! Give me nine-six-three-five-five, . . . (again to Connelly) Ten cars ordered placed tomorrow afternoon for Monday morning loading."

Another wait; then—

"Hello . . . is this Pierce? Bender speaking. Say, you old sorrel top, we two red heads have got to get together, just as soon as possible . . . Holiday be hanged! . . . Fine. Since she's away, come down and have breakfast with me at the Inn, at seven tomorrow morning . . . Atta boy . . . Seven bells, sharp, in the breakfast room. Don't fail me, will you? . . . I can't tell you over the wire; go back to bed. I'll tell you about it tomorrow morning. Good night!"

Bender came back and sat upon the bed, rubbing his hands briskly.

"Well, Conny, I've got things moving, anyhow," he told his benefactor, "and I think we're going to put up a real fight yet."

* * * * *

The first breakfast table to be set in the Capitol Inn the following morning was set for three; and, two minutes after seven found three men, two with red hair and one with black, partaking of a breakfast which was surprisingly incidental to three such healthy looking men, so heated did their conversation quickly become.

"Goodness knows, I've no love for Haine," declared the eldest of the trio, Tom Pierce, "I'd like to do him dirt, if I could, but I don't see how I'm going to help you out. If I don't give him and his different business interests top service, I'll receive an interview with the Chief. And, if you must know it, my boss has the prettiest piece of green carpet in front of his desk that you ever saw in your life. No, Bender! I'd like to help you out; but I'm an impossibility on this deal."

Bender's baby blue eyes were snapping blue blazes, as he looked up a Pierce from beneath his heavy brows.

"Now, just hold your horses, Tom," he purred in his quiet voice, "no one wants to put you in wrong with your Chief. What I want to know is this, *will you help me out, if you can do so and not break any of the rules of the road?*"

Pierce hesitated "Well . . . I might . . . if . . ."

"If you could get back at Haine without suffering for it?"

Pierces' face reddened.

"I'll tell the world!" he growled. "Say! he pulled about the meanest trick on us a man ever pulled, last week. "Do you know what he did?"

Of course, neither Bender nor Connelly knew; and both waited with a shake of the head.

"Why, the old scalawag just simply tied us up tight, so we can hardly move. You know, Haine practically runs the Shore Line—owns most of the stock, now, and the whole crew jumps when he whistles. Well, as you know, the Lake Shore is supposed to take all the empty gondola cars that come in from the west, and turn them over to the L.M.T. & T. at Bailey. Right now, the gondola equipment is coming through pretty fast and it keeps us humping to move it along without plugging us up.

"Last Thursday morning, what did the Orange Front night foreman do but call me out of bed about three bells and ask me for a special switch on a car of green stuff. I told him I would be down at the office at seven o'clock—an hour early, mind you—and take care of it for him, right away. But that wasn't enough. I guess he thought, just because he was speaking for old Haine, that I was going to go hopping out through the yards in my nightshirt to find his car for him. I told him to jump in the river.

"Next day—that was last Friday—Martin called me up from the Shore Line and told me that they couldn't take any more gondolas off our hands for a week. He wouldn't say why—he just had orders, and that was all there was to it.

"Of course, that made me crazy. With only enough storage track to handle our regular stuff, such a tie-up would paralyze us in two days. Finally, yesterday morning, I called the Old Man himself. I told him just what the situation was, and begged him, with tears in my eyes, to help us out. The old rabbit just laughed at me. Told me he would be just as prompt to help

me as I had been to help the Orange Front Stores with the car load of green stuff. Now, wouldn't that knock a dog off'n a bone cart?"

Bender grinned, while Connelly laughed outright.

"Yes," wailed Pierce, in an irritated voice, "it may be comedy for you, but it's tradegy for me."

Bender's smile was gone now; and in its place had come an expression of keenness, as he leaned across the table and laid a hand upon Pierce's arm.

"Say, Tom!" he whispered, "how would you like for *me* to take those gondolas off your hands?"

Pierce looked his amazement.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Bender feigned impatience.

"Oh, don't be so dumb. Your Belt Line runs out as far as Freeport, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"That's your transfer point to the GD&R, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, the GD&R would be perfectly willing to get the haul of those gondolas, wouldn't they?"

"Yes."

"And it's just as short a haul by the GD&R as by the Shore Line, isn't it?"

"Yes . . . but . . . "

"Don't butt in! Listen to me! Can't you better afford to haul a hundred of those gondolas out to Freeport to get rid of them? Especially, if you could teach Haine a lesson?"

Pierce was now doing some hard thinking; and his eyes were brightening with the effects of the effort.

"By George, I get you!" he cried. "You would have me turn a hundred empty gons over to the GD&R. Then, the GD&R could use them to plug up the sidings in King County, so the Orange Front can't spot their cars for unloading."

"Exactly! Do that much for me, and I'll get busy with the GD&R. I can pull wires over there. I'll guarantee you that you will have an embargo notice from the GD&R first thing tomorrow morning, stating that you must not take any shipments for carload placement for five towns in King County. "Now, will you do it?"

Pierce sprang to his feet, giving Bender a resounding slap between the shoulders, as they walked toward the cashier's desk.

"*Will* I?" he cried. "Say! you just trot along over to the GD&R and tell Haynes that there will be a hundred gondolas at Freeport by one o'clock this afternoon. If you can handle the balance of the trick, go to it, and more power to you. Then, how I will chuckle, when I call the Orange Front bunch tomorrow morning and advise them that there is an embargo on King County points. Hot dawg!"

* * * * *

A very cool, very sedate gentleman of approximately forty-five or fifty years—one of those young-old men whose hair grays early but whose faces remain young in expression—sat quietly at his mahogany desk, secure in his fastness behind frosted plate glass and more mahogany. It was Monday morning—nearly noon—and Jasper Haine was in conference, as usual. He had many conferences regularly each week. This Monday

morning session was reserved for the Orange Front Stores' staff of executives.

With him were his Superintendent, his Advertising Manager, his Attorney, and four district Supervisors. They had been plunged deep in a discussion of the subject of Chain Store expansion, when an interruption had occured. The foreman at the Orange Front Warehouse had just called the Superintendent to inform him that an embargo had made impossible their car load shipments to King County points.

What was the big idea?

The foreman didn't know. All he knew was that he had all ten cars loaded, ready to bill out, when Tom Pierce had called and told him that the shipments could not be accepted by his line until Thursday, at the earliest —possibly Friday.

The Superintendent held a hurried conversation with Haine, himself, regarding this new difficulty.

"Tell him to wait a few minutes, and we will call him back," was Haine's instruction. "Then ask the operator to get Pierce on the line."

Tom Pierce was soon waiting, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes, for the redoubtable Haine to speak, at the other end of the wire.

"Hello, Pierce!" came Haine's voice, with a snap like that of a whip, "what's this nonsense I hear about an embargo on King County points?"

"It's Gospel Truth," replied Pierce.

"You knew, didn't you, that the Orange Front was shipping out ten cars this morning to just those points?" inquired Haine, his voice silky in its smoothness.

"Yes, sir; but it so happens that I have nothing to do with the GD&R."

Haine laughed in a low chuckle.

"I'd like to believe that, Pierce. But it's very strange, indeed, that only five points in an obscure section of the country, which haven't been embargoed in twenty years, should be closed just when I wanted to stage a little stunt that might step on someone else's toes. Such things don't *happen*, Pierce, except by deliberate design. What is behind all this, Pierce?"

Pierce could not repress a leap of glee in his tones, as he retorted. "Confidentially, Mr. Haine, I'll tell you what's behind it. When you took advantage of a situation to retaliate for my refusal to be your slave and hop down to the office last week Thursday in my pajamas to dig out a carload of lettuce, you lost sight of the fact that you *might* want more service of a preferred type from the Belt Line. When you refused to take our empty gondolas, I knew what was behind *that*, too. Such things don't *happen*, either, except by *deliberate design*.

"Quite naturally, we must set those gondolas somewhere. Since your Shore Line would not take them, we were forced to make the long haul to Freeport, yesterday, with a special crew. We turned them over to the GD&R, who has used the sidings in Pomoroy, Bluemont, Cascade, Stanwood and Beulah, for storage on the empties which you refused to take from us. Now, you can't get your cars spotted there because the empties you turned down block you. Chickens will come home to roost, even Jasper Haine's!"

Haine slammed down the receiver.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed, turning to his staff, "Austin, we're whipped! Worst of all, we're beaten with our own club! Might as well call the warehouse and have 'em unload—we can't break that embargo, because we haven't a leg to stand on. I'm sorry, too, for the poor war sufferers up there in King County; but the war will be over before we can get our supplies through."

Austin was bursting with a suggestion.

"Say, Chief! What's the matter with shipping by truck?' '

Haine shook his head.

"No, the gods as well as the railroads are with Bender," he laughed. "I just read in the morning paper that the new stretch of pavement, this side of Beulah, has been undermined by the rains. No heavy traffic can get through. And we don't have a truck in our fleet that could negotiate those clay road detours after all this rain. No, Austin! We're whipped, on this deal; but, look out! There's a new deal coming!"

Haine pushed a little pearl button before him, and a young lady quickly answered.

"Tell Forsythe to look around, and find out if Bender was in town Saturday night or yesterday!" he ordered.

Later Monday, Haine sat in conference with his attorney, alone. Peabody was his closest confidant; and, next to Haine, the largest investor in the Haine interests. When the big man had a problem to work out, he invariably took it to Peabody, whether for legal advice or otherwise.

"This man, Bender, has me guessing a bit, Peabody," Haine confessed, a slight frown furrowing his brow.

Peabody waved the suggestion aside.

"Forget it, Jap!" he scoffed. He's just a little gnat in the ointment. He spoiled this dish of sauce, but one deal in a lifetime more or less can't matter."

Haine shook his head.

"I'm afraid you're wrong," he persisted. "The young cub is bright, and he's a fighter . . . and this is the third time he has slipped one over me."

"Well, if that's the case—hire him! We need such fellows in our organization. That's the secret of Big Business, Jap. If we do bump up against a chap, now and then, who is too much for us to fight with brains, we can always hire him, and get his brains on our side of the battle. If you can't lick 'em, buy 'em! That's always a good motto."

Haine shook his head again.

"That motto is just like all other good ones—it's a good one when it works. But it won't work in this case. I've tried!"

"Stuff and nonesense!" exclaimed Peabody, impatiently. "Every man has his price."

"Perhaps so," granted Haine. "But it may be a hopeless job finding out a man's price."

Haine searched his desk for two long minutes, before he found what he sought. Then, locating a letter, he handed it to Peabody to read.

"Perhaps you'll read this—then tell me what his price is," he smiled.

Peabody scanned the lines, hurriedly; then, sitting a little more upright in his chair, as one startled, he reread more carefully:

Capitol City,
March 7, 1925.

Mr. Jasper Haine,
Capitol Bank Bldg.,
City.

Sir: Your letter, offering me a position on your staff, has been received, and carefully considered. In reply, I must express regret that you have misjudged me, and my motives for my past attitude toward you and your methods of business.

Very frankly, Mr. Haine, there are connections which a man cannot endure and remain a man. For me, there is no position which you can offer which would be an inducement for me to sacrifice my self-respect to a degree which would permit my acceptance, at any price.

There is not enough money in the world to hire me to prove traitor to myself, and my honor. I am unalterably opposed to your system of operation. I conscientiously believe you to be selfish, unmoral in matters of business ethics, and absolutely un-American in your competitive methods.

I have watched your operations; and it has been twice my choice privilege to interfere with them, when they became too flagrant in their violation of American rights and principles. Be assured that I shall continue to watch you; and I shall not hesitate to meddle at every offered opportunity. I shall no doubt never be able to embarrass you seriously, in your ruthless methods of business; but I assure you I shall glean untold satisfaction in the simple knowledge that I have opposed the system and the power for which you stand, even though I be sentenced to life in obscurity as a penalty for my daring.

Believe me, I have all the reasons in the world for utterly refusing to have a thing in common with you and yours. God alone knows all my rea-

sons. If I shall ever be able to embrace the Faith of my godly father and my sainted mother, it shall be only when I see you and the diobolical system of which you are a part finally smashed in just retribution for the misery which you have wrought in the past, and the ruin which you contemplate in the future! The more I see of your activities, and those of others like you, the more convinced I am that the syndicate system in business in designed to perform rapine upon all that has been achieved by those who pioneered and suffered, bled and died to make America what it is today!

Of course, this all nonsense to you; but these are my convictions in the matter. So I shall go on, foolishly flying in the face of the powers that be, choosing to fight and lose, rather than to give in to what I believe to be cowardice. I will give you the satisfaction of knowing that your offer to me has been tempting; but I do not believe that I shall ever sell out to a man, a system and a moral force in business, all of whom I despise with loathing unutterable.

W. B. Bender

Peabody returned the letter to his senior.

"Well!" he blurted out, rather ruefully. "He makes himself plain, to say the least. If that's the way he feels, I don't blame him for turning you down. No, Jap! I don't think you'll ever hire Bender."

Haine appeared to be troubled.

"Peabody, the boy is absolutely honest in his convictions. Of course, he is wrong; but I hate to have anyone feel that way toward me. You know, I *have* been ruthless, just as he says; and his condemnations *are* uncomfortably near the truth—all of them."

Peabody shrugged.

"Forget it, Jap! Business is business. Of course, it's tough on a few, who happen to get in the way of the cars; but, when crossings are marked, it's their own fault when they're hit."

"True enough; but you know, and I know, Peabody, that we don't always find it convenient or wise to mark *all* the crossings. This chap is not only bitter against our *system*—he has a *personal* grievance against *me*. Now, what do you suppose I have ever done to *him?* I never saw him, before, in my life, until two or three years ago, when he butted in on the milk deal."

"Search me!" surrendered Peabody, showing little interest in the matter. "Probably you stepped on him, some time or other, without knowing it—like a cricket hidden in the grass under your feet."

The conference over, Peabody departed; but Haine sat for a whole hour, with Bender's letter spread out before him on the desk, a troubled frown marring his sleek, well groomed face.

"Young man, you've cut out a hard berth for yourself. I'm sorry for you. You could have come with me, and I would have made a big man of you because I like you. I liked you from the moment I first saw you. And, when Jap Haine likes a man, he pushes him up. But, Jap Haine is not one to brook opposition; so you have got to get out of the way. You've gone too far now. It's going to be a finish fight, between you and me, from now on. You've played with fire just once too often. It may take a month, or it may take five years; but I'll smash you if you ever cross my trail again!

"Maybe you are building up a fighting machine. That's easy! Every little, two-by-four merchant, from every wide-place-in-the-road will back your play, as long as you are ready to fight Big Business. But you can't hold up the wheels of progress, my boy. The march of the times will go on.

"I suppose the young cub has all the merchants of King County with him, in this little freezeout game of his. So much the better. That gives me an excuse. But Bender can't get away with this sort of thing and not smart for it. He is out to make trouble for us; and by the powers I'll smash him if I have to bust every business man in King County to do it."

Chapter XIII.

THE TURNING POINT.

TWO YEARS had passed over Pomoroy's head, since Bender's first coming to town; and, again it was springtime—of the year 1927. The "mail order" incident had gone down in local history to be remembered by the many as merely something to laugh about; but, the few who had learned to *think* remembered the hectic week end as the turning point in Pomoroy's commercial career—a moment of awakening, after which Pomoroy would never again be the same.

A period of business reconstruction had transpired, with the "mail order" stunt as the pivot upon which a town, a community, and an entire county of five towns had turned to face its fate. Four days had been sufficient to bring the public to its knees, imploring the merchants to discontinue the insufferable inconvenience of a ridiculous situation created to meet a still more ridiculous demand. No longer did the people of King County require, or even suggest, that their merchants should "compete" with the outside rivals in Big Business. They had all the "competition" they cared for. As Dad Shanks had said, after the lifting of the ban on Wednesday following its Saturday inauguration, "a leetle of sech carryin's on went a long ways."

As a result of the drastic ordeal, Pomoroy and her sister towns had come into a new existence. From a

struggling, consumptive village of five hundred discontented souls, she had grown to a population of more than two thousand people. And she was still growing.

It had all been Main Street's doings—and Bender's. No sooner had the public demanded release from the intolerable "mail order" strike, than Bender began exerting his iron handed control of Independent Enterprise in the community. Marshaling his merchant forces like a true general in battle, he gave them to understand that the fight was not over, but only begun. It was now up to them to show something "new" in merchandising. Windows were cleaned up and dressed in metropolitan fashion. Stores were arranged in tidy manner. The old sloth of slovenly store keeping was replaced by an increasingly high standard of genuine "*merchandising*". Local business men began to conduct themselves as business-like operators—aggressive workers who no longer waited the public to come to them for what they could not handily buy from *outsiders who were out after the business.*

Yes! Main Street was advertising, now—and getting *results.* She had proven that people of a country community did not have to send away for their needs, while stores served them with genuine ambition to *serve* as well as to *sell.* But she was doing more than that. Under Bender's regime, she had learned to *buy.* Few local merchants who had not joined some "buying club" or other; and they insisted upon their discounts, special allowances, and all the other added considerations which had previously been enjoyed only by the "big buyers." Then, too she had a "budget"; and she held herself to

it strictly. Yes! Main Street had become very *modern. Very* modern!

She had achieved the impossible in her external change, as well as in her internal reform. Her school girl complexion had been regained. Jason's store had substituted a brick exterior for its one time weather boarding; and it was now twice its original depth. Tom Crandall's Drug Store looked like a transplant from the most exclusive commercial zone in Capitol City, with its modern lighting and dazzling displays. Tom Crandall was now living up to all the up-to-date standards of druggists of the day—so much so that it was being truthfully said of him that he "handled everything but drugs." Armstrong's bank now boasted the finest quarters of any financial institution in three counties. Josh Warner's fly-blown market had become the crowning transformation of the village. His fixtures were spotless, his aprons always immaculate—and he hadn't been caught once during the last open season without a fly swatter in the place.

Not only so! Main Street, not contented with improving her previous extent, had lengthened her reach to twice its former length, with brick pavement, new sidewalks, boulevard lighting, three traffic signals, parking zones and an officer on duty six days a week. Truly, Pomoroy had become quite "the berries," as Glenn Darling was wont to say.

But none of these had accounted for the increase in population. It had required more than window trimming, paving and trade extension to work the miraculous growth which Pomoroy had realized. That had been the *real* work—the sort of work which no mere

merchandising can do. And that had been where Bender's hand had been felt more keenly than elsewhere; for this spectacular development of Pomoroy's civic self had been largely if not entirely his performance.

One of the first things which Bender had "put over", in his early campaigning for a Greater Pomoroy, had been the organization of a Chamber of Commerce. That had been easy. But Bender had ordered that this organization should, from the very first, support a full time Secretary whose express duty it would be to labor for the material betterment and uplift of Pomoroy.

Of course, secretaries cost money; and this difficulty had demanded all Bender's patience and ingenuity to overcome. It had required a year of incessant hammering on one idea; but he had succeeded at last. Today, the Secretary of the Pomoroy Chamber of Commerce was busy reviewing his first year's term—a very satisfactory one. The gentleman in question was none other than Mr. Glenn Darling, himself. At last, Mr. Darling had succeeded in convincing Pomoroy that he was to be taken seriously!

Fortunately for him, Darling was not given, as he often said, to "kidding himself." *He* knew, as he looked over the reports which he had just completed, that the achievements of the past year had been more of Bender's doings than his own; and it hurt him not at all to know that everyone else knew it, too. Glenn Darling was made of that rare human stuff which is content to be identified with a great work, even at the expense of "second place" in the scale of human importance.

Yes, it had been Bender's work, he now told himself. The town now boasted of five industries of diversified

nature. Pomoroy no longer was forced to rely upon odd jobs and corn husking time for her employment. Her bread and butter were now regular affairs, thanks to local industrial development. A furniture plant, a flour mill, a cigar factory, a specialty manufacturer, and a chemical works, completed the major houses of employment in Pomoroy—employment which insured Pomoroy's weekly payroll of more than ten thousand dollars. Pay day meant something more than so much small change in Pomoroy, today.

It was hard to realize that one man could do so much in such a short time in such a town as Pomoroy. True enough, he hadn't *done* it all; but it had been his hand behind the work which had guided it to a successful end. End? Darling corrected himself—it was only the beginning—of what? And what would the end be?

Here, Darling's thoughts shunted off on a tangent which they had been exploring often of late. It was a sort of detour in his customary line of thought, having a more or less personal element, and having to do with the person of the man who had been the power behind the town . . . the man who had placed Darling where he was, today—the man toward whom all Pomoroy had learned to look and lean for better things.

The reason for his recent thoughtfulness of Bender, personally, lay in the fact that *Bender* had been changing, too. *How* he had changed! Darling had never noticed until just lately—but Bender certainly was a greatly different man from the young, square jawed fellow who had come breezing into Pomoroy's placid scheme of things only two years before. Something was going on behind the blue eyes, beneath that thatch of

red hair—something of a spiritual process which was working its inevitable change in the whole character of the man.

The "change" was evident; but difficult to explain. Certainly Bender had lost none of his "punch". The aggressive two-fistedness of the man was as dominant as it had ever been. Nor had he grown conceited beyond the natural conceit which had always set off well in combination with his other qualities. Nor had he become ingrown, or "crabby". On the contrary, he was more than ever the kindly, considerate fellow he had always been, in spite of his ability to be "hard boiled" in times of necessity. It was rather that he had become more quiet, more thoughtful, more earnest, more deeply engrossed in some deeper "game" which he had not as yet chosen to reveal to others—and less ruthless in those moments when the "hard boiled" side of him came to the surface. That was it! He had lost some of the rough edges of his nature—had become somewhat softened and mellowed beneath the hand of experience.

But that did not account for the whole change in this man, Bender. It went farther than that. He had become careworn. Darling had noticed only yesterday, during the board meeting over which Bender had presided, how the little, tell tale wrinkles had begun to form "crows feet" at the corners of his eyes—and how there had come a certain trace of weariness in the lift of the eyes, themselves, which had once snapped up at one so instantly. It wasn't that Bender was really worrying. Darling doubted that. He was rather inclined to sense in Bender the role of a man who has been driven into a corner of self reproach—one who has

started out upon a big job with zest, and found himself a bit tired of it all, before it was finished. At any rate, the change was there—subtle, indefinable, but none the less *real*. Maybe Billy was "cracking" under his load. *That* hadn't occurred to Darling. He must watch him more closely. He *was* under a hard grind—and he hadn't taken a single day's vacation since coming to Pomoroy. That was it! Billy must take a vacation. He would talk with Bobbie Baker about it. Bobbie could do the trick, if anyone could—and this required tact, this pulling Bender away from his work.

While he was still pondering a choice of courses to pursue, who should be a caller in the Chamber of Commerce office but Bobbie Baker, herself. Darling's face lighted up at sight of her.

"Why, of all the people in the world! You were the very one I just decided that I must see!" he cried.

Bobbie laughed. There was something about Glenn Darling that was not only likeable but positively contagious. It was this ever readiness to greet with a warm welcome—this radiation of friendly spirit.

"How nice of you," she replied, "I suppose you say that to every woman who calls here."

Darling feigned offense.

"Now, how *could* you?" he chided.

Bobbie removed her gloves, and accepted the chair which Darling had placed for her, facing him. Then, closing the door, he turned to his desk, swung about in his swivel chair, and looked at her with a strange directness. His face was sober, his air of bantering gone.

"I wanted to talk to you about Bill," he said.

Bobbie made no reply, except a lift of the brows.

"I'm becoming a little anxious about Bill. Surely, you have noticed a change in him, especially of late."

Bobbie nodded.

"Yes, I have noticed. What do you suppose it is that's working upon him? You don't think him ill, do you?"

The sudden anxiety in her voice seemed to confirm some open question in Darling's mind. At any rate, he plunged into the problem at hand.

"No . . . not that. He never felt better, you may be sure. I think he needs a vacation, Bobbie; and that's where you can do more than any of the rest of us, or all of us put together."

"I? Why I don't . . . "

Darling was a good actor; and it was easy to imitate an impatience that was actually genuine.

"Now, Bobbie, don't be so *innocent!* If *you* don't know that Bender thinks more of you than of all the rest of the people in the world—well, you're not up to Baker form, when it comes to judging human nature!"

Bobbie dropped her head, but not in time to hide a blush. Darling arose, walked around the office once, coming to rest with one leg thrown across a corner of a table at Bobbie's right.

"Look here, Bobbie!" he blurted out, leaning toward her, and gazing directly into her eyes, "when it comes to finding out things about other people—reading their minds, and that sort of thing—you are in a class by yourself. Now, I want you to tell me the truth. What has gotten into Bender, lately? Come out with it. Be a good sport, won't you? I'll never tell!"

Bobbie raised her face to meet his gaze squarely. It was the old Baker "spunk" coming to the surface again.

"Billy takes things too much to heart," was Bobbie's opinion. "Men like Billy Bender are made to win; and I'm afraid he is involved in a losing fight. I haven't told him so; but I think he feels that way about it, too —and it's going to break his heart, if he loses."

Darling lighted a cigarette, a frown puckering his forehead.

"But what has he to *fight* about?" he asked. "That's what I can't understand. Hasn't he put over everything he has ever attempted in this man's town? As far as he is concerned, the real fight is over. He has the whole county eating from his hand; he has but to speak and everyone jumps."

Bobbie shook her head, positively.

"You don't understand Billy," she answered, "I'm afraid none of us do. Certainly, it is not his aim to make a conquest of King County. He isn't the type which glories in power. Rather, he is fighting against those who do. His dreams and ideals are not confined to King County. He sees, in his work, not this community, but the whole nation. And he realizes that he is only one—out of a hundred millions—and the hopelessness of it all is breaking him down."

Darling snorted.

"I know his *bug*," he argued. "He has a hobby of Independent Enterprise; and his chief aversion is what he calls the *Syndicate System*. Every time he hears about another merger; or another chain store opens up—Bender sees red. I think he's worrying a lot about the moon being made of green cheese. As far as the

country is concerned, what's the difference? If he can keep the merchants of *this town* on the map, he should worry about the country. Let the rest of the world go by, I'd say."

Again Bobbie shook her head.

"But you don't understand, Glenn; or you wouldn't talk that way. I know it seems foolish to us; but I can appreciate Billy's viewpoint, too. He is a born leader of men, Billy is; and a fighter! *Principle* with him is everything. He would sooner die than violate a principle. He is just an all-wool American—a patriot at heart, if ever there was one. He sees in this Syndicate System an un-American institution, which threatens everything for which America has always stood. That it is inevitable will not swerve him an inch from his course. Billy Bender is going to make a fight of it—a little fight, perhaps; and a hopeless one. But, Glenn, it takes a *man* to do that!"

Glenn nodded glumly.

"I've always wondered why he insists upon fighting these big outfits. Take Haine, for instance. Why, Bender told me, himself, that Haine offered him a mighty fine thing of it, if he would only join his staff. Now, *why?* Why should he throw away all his fine ability and brains, fighting against such odds, when he could have a soft berth in business, himself? Billy Bender would certainly be a *wow* in Big Business, with that head of his working on the winning side!"

"Billy Bender could never do that," cried Bobbie, warmly. "That's why we all look up to him. He isn't for sale. He may be only one man against millions—

but he is just big enough that money can't touch him, where principles are involved."

"Hang the principles!" shouted Darling, throwing his cigarette into the fireplace, in an access of disgust. "It may be good sportsmanship to stick by a sinking ship; but I call it darned poor business."

Bobbie smiled a little sadly.

"Perhaps so. But, after all, isn't the secret of our present troubles in business just this—that we are practicing too much *good business?*"

"Oh, piffle! Why all this grandstand stuff between us? You know, and I know, Bobbie, that it's the cash register that counts in the long run. People are going to buy where they can buy the cheapest. The chain store is here to stay. Big Busniess will go right on, making its mergers, and its combines, and nothing will ever stop it. Maybe Billy Bender can block them, for a time, in King County—but no one, not even Billy Bender, is going to make a ripple on the pond, so far as the country is concerned."

Bobbie was preparing to depart.

"Now, you have me beyond my depth, so I shall be going. I had no intention of entering into an argument, when I came in. I only dropped in to ask you if you wouldn't enjoy a little evening at bridge?"

All things "business" fled from Darling's face and mind.

"Just name the evening," he challenged.

"Very well . . . Friday evening. Billy is coming over, for a wonder. He claims to detest bridge; but I coaxed him up to it. And he is going to bring Dorothy along. They are coming right over from the office, to

have dinner with us at six-thirty. You will come, too?"

Darling rubbed his palms together, eloquently.

"Don't ask so many foolish questions, little one! Just run along home, and begin preparations to entertain the royal party. If his highness, Billy Bender the Great, will be there, it will certainly be the duty of his humble Man Friday to attend. That's me—all over."

Bobbie smiled at him in a mysterious manner.

"As a matter of fact, we shall not play bridge, at all. We shall merely play *at* it. The purpose of the meeting will be to perform an operation upon Billy Bender's psychology, and try, if possible, to discover what is wrong with him. Billy needs some friends, I think—and it's so hard to be friends with him, because he won't *let* you. If you know what I mean."

Bobbie's eyes were shining with something suspiciously like tears, despite her brave effort at a smile. Darling was not so "slow."

"Atta girl," he murmured, patting her on the shoulder. "He sure needs friends and no mistake, if he is going to clean up the whole country! But, seriously, Bender's got to come out of his shell, and put us wise to his game, if we are to second his motions. He has something up his sleeve; and we've just naturally got to find out what it is."

Chapter XIV.

CAESAR AND BRUTUS, MODERNIZED.

JASPER HAINE had been waiting for two years for his chance. To anyone but Jasper Haine, two years would have been a long time to test the patience; but not Haine. He could wait one year, or ten, with equal calmness. He knew that his time would come; and, sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof.

Another conference was being held in the private room, behind its partitions of frosted plate glass, around the mahogany table, with Haine occupying the high-backed chair at the head, as becomes the dignity of a dictator. It was the weekly session of the Orange Front executive staff; and one of the most important since the founding of the great organization. The Orange Front Stores were about to inaugurate a great trade expansion campaign, in which it was planned to double the present number of two hundred stores within the coming year.

"The Orange Front Stores have enjoyed the most prosperous year in their history," Haine told them complacently; and every man present looked pleased because one *must* look pleased when the Chief of the Orange Front announced increased profits. That was a part of the job of being an Orange Front executive, whether such profits meant increased salaries for the staff, or not.

"Our records show that we have increased our volume of business per store just twenty-five percent in the past year. Such a popular vote of confidence from the trading public can mean but one thing. The policy of the Orange Front Stores is *right*. We are saving the public *money*. The public is learning this. Consequently, they are coming to us for more merchandise.

"This being true, the Orange Front Stores feel it to be their duty to extend their field of operations. If we are saving the people in our present locations *money*, it is our duty to reach out into other localities where our service will be welcomed. Consequently, this organization is about to launch as many *new* stores as we now have in operation! And it is up to you boys to put the job over—and I know you can."

Thus, by clever camouflage, and patting of the vanity of his coterie of vassals, Jasper Haine "pepped" his staff for the drive. Describing the work which lay before them, he pictured in glowing colors the fascination of such an undertaking. The Orange Front Stores would reach out into every country town of suitable size and location within a certain radius of Capitol City. They would seize upon the best locations and do the rest with advertising. It was all very simple.

"The day of the Independent Grocer, with his dirty store, and old-time methods, is past." he told them. "Business is progressing along scientific lines, and the local merchant is being cast into the discard. The Chain Store is the modern development which is daily proving its superiority over the old system. Of course, the Orange Front Stores are not as *large*, as some of the others, but we don't have to back up for the

greatest. Our reports show that we are making just as much money per store as The Dominion and Gulf Company, which now has more than twelve thousand stores in the United States.

"It is the advertising of such firms as the Dominion and Gulf which has sold the American public upon the idea of the Chain Store. Naturally, we benefit by that. Being a Chain, we hold the advantage over the local merchant, who can afford neither to advertise nor cut prices. As far as our competition with larger Chains, like the Dominion and Gulf for instance, is concerned, we are first in this particular part of the country. After we have become thoroughly established, they can't push us out."

Again, Haine went on to show the impregnable position of the Orange Front Stores in its stronghold of public favor. And, again, the puppets and vassals about the table smiled their approval, and nodded their unanimous appreciation and understanding. Having completed his "pep talk", Haine opened the meeting for discussion.

"I want you boys to understand fully every point in this great undertaking; and precisely what your respective jobs shall require of you," he impressed upon them. "Now is the time to ask questions for ignorance is no excuse for any Orange Front executive. It's your business to know your job. If you don't, it's your own fault. Come, now! Don't sit there like a row of pop bottles!"

One of the district supervisors commanded the floor.

"I have been informed, Mr. Haine, that I am being assigned to the King County district to open up the territory?"

Haine nodded. "That is correct."

"I should like to know what method you propose to employ to establish public good will in a community like King County. I have been up that way during the past two days, and looked the field over. I find that there is a newspaper man in Pomoroy who has built up a solid front of opposition to outside business. The people up there simply refuse to trade outside, any more. How will the Orange Front Stores break down that prejudice?"

Haine cleared his throat; the young man was given a smile as a mark of distinction among his fellows for having been the first to ask questions.

"You bring out a very important point, Markham," he congratulated, "one which every one of you ought to have been thinking about. It is true that in some localities, like King County, there is an unkindly popular attitude toward outsiders in business. The merchants in that territory have been fortunate in having a leader who has anticipated their enemies, and thrown up a defense which will temporarily hinder us. But we have done a little anticipating, ourselves."

Here, Haine paused for another encouraging smile, then went on.

"In the past, we Chain Store merchants have made some mistakes in our policies. One of these has been that we have not become a part of the community in which we have done business. Local charities and benefits were turned down. Community movements, we

ignored. But we find that this has worked against us. Today, the progressive Chain is seeing to it that its managers are becoming active in their respective communities.

"What we propose to do in King County is simply this. The Orange Front Manager in Pomoroy will become a member of the Pomoroy Chamber of Commerce. He will enter into the community doings like a real neighbor. Why, we'll even get him in as a Sunday School teacher, if necessary."

A laugh greeted this bit of intended humor.

"In other words," Haine continued after the interruption, "our Managers must become *mixers* who can court popularity. You want to remember that the newspaper man and the merchants in Pomoroy have made one mistake. They have talked *Home Trade*, instead of *Independent Trade*. And, while the people in Pomoroy and King County no longer are strong for trading with the mail order houses and the peddlers that come in from outside, that will not trouble us. *If our Manager becomes one of the folks in Pomoroy, the people will patronize us, because our store is just as much a part of Pomoroy as any other.* A lot of Orange Front Stores have *home town Managers*. Don't you see that our friend, the newspaper man in Pomoroy, hasn't hurt us any, if we play our cards right?"

The inquirer nodded. His question was satisfied. But Haine had more to say.

"Right here, I want to break a bit of good news. The Orange Front Stores will soon have another bargain that will send the public into seventeen fits of frenzy, and bring the women into our stores in crowds. As you

know, it has always been our policy to offer certain 'specials' each week. But we are soon going to advertise an *every day special—BREAD!*

"Heretofore, we have had to buy our bread from other bakers. Of course, we get extra discounts which the small merchants can't get; but that amounts only to about a cent on the loaf. That isn't enough to get the public to coming in real crowds. So, we have just bought out a local bakery, and *we are going to bake our own bread, and sell it at manufacturer's cost.* What is the public going to say, when we announce a *full pound loaf, in an* orange wrapper, at *FIVE CENTS?* Why, that will pack every store to its doors—even in Pomoroy. Just give the public a few bargains, and you can have their whole business. All the preaching in the world can't keep them from saving money. They *will buy* where they can buy the cheapest."

At this point, another staff member signified his desire to ask a question.

"Is there not a danger in that, Mr. Haine? We all know that the Orange Front Stores are not giving bargains on everything in stock. Suppose the public gets wise to this game of ours? Then, if they begin buying only the cut price items, and leave the rest on our shelves, where do we come in at?" '

Haine smiled, again. That smile of his could work wonders. It was something that every man on the staff yearned to earn for himself. It was a mark of distinction—like a medal or a war cross.

"Leave that to *us,*" was Haine's reply, "We have thought that all out. By the time the public begins to do that, we *will* be selling *everything* at *less than the*

Independent Merchant can buy it for. There are tricks in every trade, you know."

Much discussion followed, with Haine always ready to answer all questions. He was superb in his generalship—always seeming to *lead* while he actually *drove* his staff to greater efforts. Immediately after the session had been dismissed, the man, Markham, approached his chief, and asked for a private word with him.

"What's the trouble, Markham?" asked Haine, kindly, when they were closeted alone in an adjoining room.

"Oh, Lyons is up in the air, again."

"What has he on his chest, now?"

Markham shook his head.

"I don't know. He is just balky, that's all. I swear, I just can't do anything with him."

Haine lost no time giving orders.

"Then fire him."

Evidently Markham did not relish this suggestion.

"I have been tempted to do that, sir. But he is *such* a good man, I can't bring myself to let him go. Why, his store shows an increase every week. Folks like him, too; and we'll lose a lot of trade if he goes."

Haine amended his suggestion.

"Then raise him two dollars a week."

Again Markham shook his head.

"That won't do the trick. He isn't kicking about his pay. He just won't follow orders when some fool scruple of his interferes."

"Oh!" breathed Haine softly, "Too much conscience, eh?"

"Yes. I think that's it. I wish *you* would talk with him. I brought him along up with me this morning. He is outside in the main office now. Maybe *you* could straighten him out. He said that he would like to talk with you and that you would understand him."

Haine shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"Very well. Understand, I can't always take *my* time to keep your disgruntled men in line, Markham. That is *your* job. I'll do it this time though. Show him in."

The young man, named Lyons, was promptly ushered into the august presence of Haine, the mighty. It was easy to see by the tremor of his hands and the uneasiness in his manner that he was fully impressed with the honor bestowed upon him. Markham introduced him to his employer, and Haine, with a cordial smile and a strong hand clasp, seemed to set Lyons at ease.

"Sit down, Lyons. Here—have a cigar."

Lyons, now properly surprised and pleased, was ready for the grill.

"Just what is the trouble, Lyons?" asked Haine, his face now seriously set in its harder lines. Haine was now getting down to *business*. "Markham tells me that you have been rather unruly on certain points. That is bad, you know. It is only because you are a *good man* that you haven't been fired. Now, I am giving you a special chance to straighten up. What's on your mind?"

Lyons shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Well, you see, sir, it's like this. You have some rules which I can't follow out and feel like I'm playing

the game on the square with those whose money I take across the counter."

Haine's eyes narrowed ever so little.

"Just *what* rule, for instance?"

"The rule of store charges, for instance." retorted Lyons, unfrightened, despite his uneasiness. "When the warehouse sends us a bag of sugar we are charged with one hundred pounds net. You know that can't be done. No manager can deal out a hundred-pound bag of sugar in twenty five-pound lots and give full measure on every package."

Haine looked at his Manager, never once taking his eyes away from him.

"Five times twenty is just one hundred, is it not?"

"Yes, on paper, but you don't allow anything for shrinkage."

"What shrinkage?" snapped Haine, "Where is there any shrinkage?"

"The burlap bag represents some shrinkage. Then, a quarter-ounce overage counts up."

Haine leaned toward his man and tapped him upon the knee with a soft,white, delicately tapered forefinger.

"You forget the twenty paper bags which are weighed in on the customer. As for overweight—we don't give *overweight*. Be careful with your scales and you won't have any trouble. With us, five times twenty is *one hundred*—and *overweight doesn't go*. That's our rule. It's yours to follow."

Lyons stood up, a flash in his clear eyes and a toss to his head which spoke of a spirit uncowed.

"Another thing, Mr. Haine. I understand that you have bought out the City Bakery?"

Haine nodded.

"You propose to bake your own bread?"

"We do."

"What will the retail price be, may I ask?"

"Five cents for the pound loaf."

A flush of angry red flooded the young man's face, then receded, leaving him pale, his eyes flashing fire.

"Do you call that fair?"

Haine had no smiles to give now.

"Fair to whom?" he asked.

"The other bakers."

Haine shrugged his unconcern in such matters.

"Other bakers don't concern me, Lyons. Business is business with me. You can't mix sentiment with business these days."

Lyons drew his chair nearer Haine and sat down again. It was his turn to tap Haine upon the knee with a forefinger which bore more marks of toil.

"Listen, Haine."

It was easy to see that Lyons' employer noticed the omission of the "Mister" because it was so apparently deliberate. But Lyons went on, rasping out the stinging words that were boiling to his lips.

"For a long time I've suspected that you were just that sort of man. Why, you double-barreled hypocrite! I sat in your Bible Class last Sunday when you attempted to teach the lesson about Nathan before King David, who told the story of the man with great flocks who wanted to make a sacrifice. Rather than choose a lamb from his own thousands of sheep, he went to a poor peasant home and took the family's one little ewe-lamb to offer.

"Oh, how you did roast that fellow for his selfishness and greed. But you didn't say anything about the king-pin plotter of the Orange-Front Stores, did you? Oh, no! *That* would be too practical for convenience."

A low, hard, bitter laugh escaped the curled lips of the speaker.

"You make me sick with your Sunday piety and weekday thievery which you cloak in the garb of *good business*. For weeks I have endured your orders and your rules, trying to be a good man for your house in return for my family meal ticket. But this new stunt of yours is the last straw.

"Oh, you will hear me out. Don't try to butt in on me. *You* tried to teach *me* last Sunday about the rich man robbing the poor man of his one little ewe-lamb in order that he might make a sacrifice. But you taught it as an ancient matter. Now, *I'm* going to teach *you* the same lesson, *modernized* and *up-to-date*.

"The Orange-Front Stores are following a policy of cutting their prices on certain articles to get the public into their stores. You must make a *sacrifice*, in other words. And you have thousands of items in your store which you can cut to make your *sacrifice* to get business. But what do you do? Do you take something out of your own stock as a *sacrifice?* No, you buy out a bakery and you are going to use *BREAD* as your sacrifice. You will *sell your bread at what it costs you to produce it*.

"Haine, my poor old father is a baker. For years he has worked long and hard to make enough money to put us boys through school. And he has done it—

God bless him! He's the best dad a boy ever had. Now he and Mother are getting old, but because they spent their money to fit us for better things in life than they ever had, they must go on working for their living. Now, after he has given me an education to make a good Manager for *you*, you are going to turn around and run *him* out of business. In other words, instead of taking your *sacrifice* from your own flock, you are going to take my father's one, little ewe-lamb away from him—rob him of his profit on *BREAD*, the only thing he has in the world, and you would have *me* help in the crime!

"Damn you, Haine. You think you're going to fire me, eh? Ha-ha! Guess again. You can't fire someone who isn't working for you any more. I've quit, see? I wouldn't work for you on a bet. I'd shoot myself before I'd take another of your dirty dollars. My last week's pay—fah! When the paymaster writes out my check, tell him to throw it in the fire as he would a filthy rag. I'm poor and I must work for a living to buy bread for my wife and babies—but, by God! I wouldn't insult their decency by providing them with tainted money—nor would I ruin their digestion with your maggot-eaten five-cent bread, made from flour wrung from farmers who can't make a profit on their wheat, and baked by underpaid men in your sweat shop bakery. I'd see you in hell first."

Markham made as if to interfere, but Lyons turned upon him with tigerish ferocity.

"Don't mix in this, Markham—not, unless you have a bank account to guarantee a hospital bill! I've been waiting a long time for this chance to speak my piece (this last to Haine), and it's worth losing a job for."

Haine had sprung to his feet, his face livid, waiting an opening for speech.

"Get out of here!" he screamed, "Get out before I throw you out! Never come in here again—ah!"

The last exclamation came from pure astonishment, for Lyons had taken a notion to *do* things, rather than *say* them. Seizing the hand which Haine had reached out to grasp his collar, Lyons whirled his former chieftain about, hurled him into his chair in a sidewise position which rendered him helpless. Then, very deliberately, while he held him struggling but secure with one hand, he slowly but painfully grasped Haine's nose between a thumb and finger and tweaked it savagely.

"You *would*, would you?" he laughed with throaty glee, through clenched teeth. "Not if I know it! I'll get out of here and I won't be back again! But I've just *got* to do this job up clean before I go! Maybe you are a big man in *business*, Haine. Just big enough to go around making war on the weak, but honest and hard-working souls who seek only to make their own way decently in the world. But, when it comes to a man-to-man settlement like this, *you* get the short end of the deal. There, your nose is a bright, rosy red, Mr. Haine. It advertises itself very effectively. After this when you go out taking advantage of others weaker than yourself you can't say you didn't know how it felt to them. I've given you a lesson in how it feels to suffer at the hands of a stronger. I hope my services as a private tutor have been satisfactory—good-bye, Mr. Haine."

And Lyons actually bowed in the door as he backed out.

Chapter XV.

RIGHT-ABOUT-FACE.

BOBBIE BAKER'S "bridge party" was a remarkable success, considering the fact that the cards had not yet come into evidence. What was more, there was no promise of a game. After all, that had merely been an excuse for an invitation which might have excited the suspicions of the victim had it not had some special foundation in reason. As it was, Bender had come to a "bridge party" entertaining no love for the amusement, and he was perfectly content to enjoy the coziness of this hospitable home with nothing to do but to talk and to listen.

Jason had contributed a cheery part to the evening by starting a fire in the fireplace. Dinner over, the four young people adjourned to the living room. Dorothy Herndon had chosen the divan, in whose delicious comfort she now half sat, half curled. Darling had retired to an obscure corner, where he lolled lazily in a great overstuffed chair, enjoying a cigarette and a delightful view of a milk-white profile in which a wealth of yellow hair was the predominant element. Bender occupied a big, leather rocker beside the fireplace, his long legs stretched out before him upon the tile. Bobbie busied herself a moment, lighting the floor-lamp, switching off the white lights, and watching the rare effect produced. There was something rare in the

picture of Bender sitting there, half in the light, half in the shadows, the flickering gleam of the flames reflected in a dull glow as it played its shafts through his mop of red hair. His face was so rugged, so eloquent of strength. Yet, she again declared to herself that those lean features looked tired and careworn. Oh, if only they could get him into a talking mood!

Slipping away to the kitchen she found Jason, arrayed in an apron, less than half sufficient in dimension to fit his frame. Jason always insisted upon helping his wife wash the dinner dishes when Bobbie had company.

"Daddy! Remember what I told you to do tonight. Use your head and don't rush him. If you work it right I think he'll *talk*. Just get him started and Glenn and I will do the rest."

Jason patted the brown head.

"Leave that to me, gal. I'm jist as much hankerin' to feel him out as you be—fer bizness reasons."

By the time Bobbie had returned to the living room Bender had a cigar going, full blast. He looked up lazily at Bobbie, who appropriated a seat directly opposite in the corner, and smiled.

"If Heaven is nothing more than this—it will be *Heaven*," he murmured.

She answered his smile but said nothing, feeling that he would continue when he chose.

"Yes, this is something which I never knew in all my life—just solid, homely comfort, with nothing to worry about until tomorrow. If *all* bridge parties are like this, I know I shall learn to like the game after all."

Conversation languished. Once he glanced suggestively at the piano, then at Bobbie, and she feared that he would ask her to play. That might spoil things. It just happened that Jason came shuffling into the room at this moment, dragging his own personal and private arm chair of ancient vintage behind him, his carpet slippers on and the evening paper under his arm.

"It ain't often I try to read in a party o' young folks, but things is kinda quiet here—and it's sorta cozy-like here by the fire."

Bobbie wondered what her father would do with the evening paper, but Jason always chose his own methods of deception and he usually knew what he was about.

Bender produced another cigar, but Bobbie had already gone for her father's pipe—a vile-looking briar of aromatic promise, which he accepted in preference and readily filled and lighted.

"Wal, son, I reckon things is going on about so-so over at your place, eh?"

Bender nodded. Conversation started at this point, flitting like a butterfly in a flower garden, lighting upon first this subject then to another. Business, weather, developments of the season, local gossip—what not! Yet, all the time Jason retained command of its course and the others waited until he should bait Bender out of the fastness of his native reticence. Then they would all fall upon him and drag him out into the open with all his ideas, his schemes and his unspoken philosophies, whatever they might be.

At last Jason made a cast with a new bait.

"I hear that the Orange-Front Stores is about to open up a whole string o' country-town stores. A sales-

man told me so today. Heard anything about it, Glenn?"

Darling toyed with the lure a moment, then passed it on to Bender.

"No, I hadn't heard about it. Have you, Bill?"

"Oh, yes, I knew about that a week ago," replied Bender, with something almost like a sigh. "It's nothing more than I have been expecting. In fact, I'm surprised that Haine has waited this long. It is only a matter of time until every town will have its local branches of Big Business."

Jason had been wiping his glasses. Now he slipped them back into his pocket. The paper slid to the floor, while he stared, wide eyed, into the fire.

"I reckon it's lucky fer us fellers in this man's town that you come jist when you did. Otherwise, we'd be the same, old sticks-in-the-mud, jist waitin' fer some big outfit like the Orange-Front to come along an' gobble us up," he mused.

Bender's head lay far back on the easy head-rest, his eyes directed ceilingward.

"I'm not so sure about that, Jason," he countered, "The more I study myself and my work in this community and the more I review the change that has come about as a result of some things I have started—the more I wonder whether my coming wasn't an ill wind for Pomoroy."

Jason shot a triumphant look at Bobbie. Bender had struck his bait.

"Wal, even so—even an ill wind may blow somebuddy good," he chuckled.

Bender straightened to an upright position.

"Yes—to the enemy!"

Jason turned a look of manufactured surprise upon his guest.

"Enemy?"

"Yes—*enemy!*" repeated Bender, leaning forward to rest an elbow upon one knee. "Hasn't it ever occurred to you, Jason, that I have overplayed my hand, in my excess enthusiasm for Pomoroy and King County?"

Jason shook his head. He *could* be dense when necessity required. Meanwhile, Darling must have decided that he was being ignored entirely beyond the limit of his dignity, for he blurted in at this point:

"How do you get that way?"

"Easily enough," replied Bender, "So easily, in fact, that I am surprised that the secretary of our Chamber of Commerce hasn't found the weak point in my program for boosting Pomoroy. That's your business, you know. You are no novice any more. I'll tell you what I'll do, Glenn. I'll just bet you the price of a new hat that I can prove to you that Pomoroy is worse off today than she was when I came here, and we'll let Jason be the judge of the debate. Are you game?"

Darling drew his chair up into the little circle.

"You're on!" he cried.

"An I'm to be the jedge of the *hat*, too," added Jason. "I don't stand fer no snitchin' in bets that I'm holdin'."

Even Dorothy Herndon had become interested, for she quietly slipped behind Bobbie's chair and perched upon the arm as Bobbie's arm stole about her waist. Meanwhile, Darling was adding his touch of spice to the program. Standing directly in front of Bender, his feet

spread apart, his hands in his pockets, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, he goaded Bender into speech.

"Come on, now! Resolved: That Pomoroy is worse off than if Billy Bender had never come to town. We shall now hear from the first speaker for the affirmative."

"All right," laughed Bender, always ready to be amused at Darling's affected poses. "In the first place, when I came to Pomoroy, everybody was satisfied with the way things were going, weren't they? The merchants were running their business, content with what came to them, and glad for the excuse to find fault because of what didn't. I came in and upset things in general with my stunts until I capped the climax by inciting the merchants to a trade-strike."

"And blocked Haine's little game of interference," interjected Darling.

"As a result of the events which followed during the past two years, what have we? Tell me that?"

Bender was now doing a little bait casting on his own. Darling bit.

"Oh, we haven't improved much," he retorted sarcastically. "The only difference between our merchants of two years ago and today is as the difference between a South Sea Islander and a Fifth Avenue debutant! Main Street was only a wide place in the road. Now it's a paved, lighted boulevard. Twice as many stores and ten times as much business. Five factories where none were before. Population increase of more than four hundred per cent. Outside of that, Pomorory hasn't done a thing! That is, outside the fact the we have our

own Chamber of Commerce, with the most brilliant secretary to be found in seven states!"

This last solicited a sniff from Dorothy and laughter from the rest. Darling always had a most daring way of hating himself.

"I grant all that," conceded Bender, "But after all is said and done, where is there any *real improvement?* Is a man a better man simply because he may have traded his overalls for broadcloth, and his bungalow for a mansion? By the same token, is a town a *better* town because it has exchanged false fronts for brick fronts, and increased its population four times?"

Darling threw up his hands in mock despair.

"*I* don't know! *I'll* bite. *Is it?*

"No. It is not! What was wrong with Pomoroy two years ago? Was it her crumby streets and her dirty windows, or was it her equally dirty gossip and her miserable backbiting? In other words, was it her *quantity* or her *quality?* I ask you."

Jason had just discovered that his pipe had gone out. While he busied himself with a match, Darling took a swing about the room, leaving a trail of cigarette smoke in his wake.

"For purposes of argument, let us assume it was her *quality* that lacked," he agreed. "Anything for the sake of argument, you know."

"All right. Then, that's all there is to it. I maintain that Pomoroy is no better at heart today than she was two years ago. You must concede that."

"I'll concede nothing," denied Darling, "It's up to you to prove it."

"Very well. I shall prove it then," smiled Bender. "Take our merchants, for instance—where have they improved, with all their increase in polish and business technique? If there is any difference, they have become *more* cold and selfish, *more* money-grasping and uncharitable in the past two years. The same may be said of the public. Why do the people of King County no longer trade with the outside houses as they once did? And why do they confine their patronage to their local towns? Because of any fraternity or sympathy which they may feel toward the local merchants? No. You know better than that. It's because they can do just as well at home—and it's more convenient. As far as motives of heart are concerned, they are no different than they were before. If any difference, they are chasing bargains and haggling for cheaper prices more today than ever before."

Darling was no mean debater and he prided himself that he was intensely practical in his logical processes.

"But the fact remains," he jeered. "We have results to show for our labors, and they are extremely gratifying to the cash register."

Bender shrugged.

"Yes, if that means anything. But, like all fine feathers, Pomoroy's surface prosperity is only skin-deep. Suppose Haine should come into Pomoroy tomorrow with a Chain Store and start out as he always does by cutting prices to the quick in order to get the people coming to him—how long do you suppose the people of this community would stand at Jason's counters? Eh?"

Darling grinned at Jason.

"In that case, I expect it would be up to Jason to meet competition. That's the way in business."

"Exactly. And that is where we have all been wrong, Glenn. I include myself in that, first and most of all. I've preached to these merchants, day after day, how they must *compete.* I've urged them to join buying clubs and buy together, just as the *big* outfits do. I've driven them into advertising stunts, and high-pressure merchandising of all kinds. My doctrine in business to the merchant who must meet big competition has been simply this: *FIGHT THE DEVIL WITH FIRE.* And they believed it. Jason, you fell for it, too —wise as you are. You all did. And I was a fool—a downright fool. I talked so wisely about fighting the Devil without looking him up and finding out what sort of fellow he was. Now, I find, upon consulting theological authorities, that you can't fight the Devil with fire for two reasons: First, he is *fireproof;* and, second, *fire is his element.*"

Bender was speaking rapidly now, and his face was set in lines of tense earnestness. Darling, who had persisted in his bantering pose, had sloughed off his air of lightness and stood listening with rapt attention. Jason, likewise, was leaning forward, drinking in Bender's words thirstily, as if they constituted a message for which he had long waited. As for the girls, Bobbie sat motionless, except for the rise and fall of her bosom; and Dorothy seemed strangely gripped, her pale eyes burning with a blue fire. At mention of Haine, Bobbie had felt the tension of her fingers tighten upon her own as their hands clasped.

"Jason, you are an old hand at the game of business. As long as your rivals confine themselves to *competition*, as we generally understand the term, you are ready to take your chances, win or lose. If you can't told your own in a fair fight, you deserve to lose. That's the rule in any game. But no game can be played fairly unless governed by rules, and there are rules of competition in this game called business. Now, I ask you, man-to-man: *What chance have you to win against a rival in business who can afford to forego immediate profits, if necessary, as investment in your failure? Then, after you are starved out of business, your enemy is free to realize a double return by virtue of the elimination of your competition.*"

Jason shook his head slowly.

"Jist about as much chance as a boxer with gloves on has a'gin a thug with a blackjack."

"Exactly," Bender agreed, "And, like the boxer, your very weapons of defense in a square game become your worst handicap."

"But," remonstrated Darling, "You are evading the law of the survival of the fittest."

Bender snorted his digust.

"I'm *not* evading it. I *deny its constitutionality!* Where does the law of the survival of the fittest apply?"

"Why, it's the law of all nature. The animal world and the realm of vegetation are all subject to it."

"Yes," retorted Bender heatedly, "In their *primeval state*. If we were all back in the uncivilized stages of savagery we might invoke that law for man as well—but I deny its application to a race which claims to be civilized. The law of the survival of the fittest cannot be

found in our statutes of the land, in our Constitution, or the Declaration of Independence. Read Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," Webster's "Reply," Patrick Henry's Speech—or any of the other masterpieces of American expression, and find one reference to that law. Why, man, our Pilgrim Fathers fled to this country to *escape* the execution of that law. If you want to seek refuge in the law of the survival of the fittest, go over to Italy and get a job from Mussolini—he and his kind believe in it, but not we Americans. We *can't—and remain American!*"

Darling was beaten in his own argument, and he knew it.

"At any rate we have strayed from the subject at hand," he dodged, "You set out to show us where you have become a liability to Pomoroy, rather than an asset. You have proven nothing as yet."

Bender sat for a long time, gazing moodily into the fire, as if he were either arranging his thoughts or debating the wisdom of divulging them to others. It was a new habit of his, this business of "thinking aloud."

"When I came to Pomoroy," he said at last, "I firmly believed that the merchant's solution lay in a combination of three methods: *Organization, Efficiency* in merchandising, and *Advertising* of the high-pressure type. But after looking over all that I have accomplished in in the past two years, like Solomon, I have decided that all is vanity."

Darling took a position before Bender and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Look here, young fellow. Do I understand you to mean that it is up to the modern business man to

throw *organization, efficiency* and *advertising* into the discard? Say, either you are becoming hopelessly out of date, or you are a man ahead of your time. Telling a business man to disown these three commercial virtues is like urging a fundamentalist to renounce his faith in the Holy Trinity."

"After all," retorted Bender, "There is little difference between men who are behind the time and those who are ahead. History repeats itself in thought as well as in action. But I am not asking the merchant to *disown* these virtues, as you call them; I merely say that he must *exercise them with care*, or they become dangerous. As long as the application of these methods is carried on strictly under the code of the American Spirit of Democracy they are wholesome virtues, but released under the creed of the Empire, they develop into vices—there is no vice which is not a perversion of a virtue."

Darling threw up his hands in despair.

"Help! Murder!" he moaned. *Please*, Bill, cut out the dramatics and oratory and talk United States, *please!*"

"All right, I'll say it another way," smiled Bender. "Conduct under the code of Democracy is nothing else than *being a good sport*—whether it be in business or in any *other* game. The creed of the Empire is simply this: *The victor wins the spoils.* To the American it is not the stake that really counts, but the triumph of winning—and there is no joy in winning, if you don't win fairly. The Imperialist cares nothing about the achievement of success—his sole objective is the *material reward.* Your Imperialist believes in the law

of *the survival of the fittest*, don't you see; the American embraces the doctrine of *Live-and-Let-Live*."

Darling scratched his head and wrinkled his forehead.

"That *sounds* fine as political premise, but as a business proposition—well, it's a bit like preaching," he suggested.

"Very much like preaching," agreed Bender, "And, if there is anything which modern business needs today, it is some good, old-fashioned *evangelism*—some of the old prophets of Israel, modernized and commercialized, who dare to come out and hurl some hell-and-damnation at the heads of our Ahabs and our Jezebels in business, who are trying to lead us away from the God of our Fathers into the worship of false gods in business. I tell you that the trend of the times is based upon false figures of economy, and the laws of mathematics are inviolate, because they are just as precise as the Creator who established them. When I add *two and two* and arrive at any other total than *four*, I know who is wrong without stopping to prove it. That is precisely what we, as a nation, are doing today—trying to make figures lie for us. He who juggles his figures is due for a reckoning and American people are no exception to that rule."

"I repeat—that *sounds* fine," laughed Darling, "But go on. We're listening."

Bender threw one long leg across the other knee and pointed an emphasizing finger at Darling.

"When you designate *Organization, Efficiency* and *Advertising* as *The Holy Trinity of Modern Business*, you used a good term. As they are being practiced in business today these three factors constitute the very

foundation of this system of centralization which the American Consumer is building up at the Great American Counter. Let us analyze each in turn.

"First, *Organization!* This is merely another term for Trust-Formation. It signifies a banding together of a mass of Independent Merchants, to combat another mass of *Stores* or *Interests* who are already bound together in one corporation or combine. Therein lies the merchant's inconsistency of practicing the very methods which he has always condemned the syndicates for employing.

"The prime factor which the syndicate has preached as a redeeming feature of its system of operation is *Buying-Power*. By virtue of their great, volume purchases, they claim to be able to secure better prices from the manufacturer or jobber—and their claims are *true*. But this very practice, if understood by American People, would be repulsive to the instincts of every true American. The syndicate today represents a system in which certain large corporations control such a vast sale for merchandise that a manufacturer *must* get their business or *face ruin*. In order to get the business he must *meet their price offers*. They are clever enough to know what his costs are—and they offer him nothing more than that. Consequently, he has the option between *starvation* or *bread and water*. As a result, he must reduce his own costs. That necessitates a cut in quality in his product—a loss to the consumer. It also means lower prices on his raw materials—a loss to the farmer, the miner, and the other producers. It also requires a reduction in the wages which he pays in his plant—a loss to labor. In other words, *Buying*

Power, in the hands of a few, is just another word for wholesale economic oppression of the masses by the privileged classes in business—IMPERIALISM!"

Here, Bender turned to Jason, who had been listening with the intentness of a child at a story hour.

"Jason, you must confess that you merchants have always held out this argument against the syndicate system in business, claiming that it was unfair and unconstitutional. Yet, your buying clubs, and your combined *Buying Power*, through *Organization*, makes you guilty of the very crimes you deplore. Am I right or wrong?"

"*Right!*" was Jason's emphatic agreement.

Darling took another of his periodical tours of the room, puffing nervously at a fresh cigarette.

"It is very apparent that you are against Merchant Organization. Pretty hard to convince merchants of that, now-days," he said.

"Get me right," remonstrated Bender, "It is not *my* opinion. I merely prove to you that this boasted *Buying-Power*, as established by both the syndicates and the organized merchant groups, is *un-American*. It is simply the spirit of Kaiserism, which we fought in the World War, translated in terms of commercialism and glossed over with a varnish of misleading propaganda for a gullible public's acceptance. Why, the Kaiser was a piker as an egotist, compared with the modern monarchs in business. *He* at least accorded the Almighty with a second-place partnership in his schemes when he cried: '*Me Unt Gott!*' The kings of commerce fail, even in that. With them '*ME*' is the sole party of the first part."

"All right—all right," conceded Darling, in mock impatience, "Grant it for the sake of argument. On to the second point. What have you to say against *Efficiency? There's* a tough one for you to overthrow!"

Again Bender was silent as he stared at the flames, now floating lazily upward in the fireplace.

"There, again, we American people demonstrate the truth of Barnum's criticism—'*the bigger the humbug, the bigger the crowd*'," he mused, "We Americans have gone crazy about *Efficiency.* It is the little, tin god upon every family's mantlepiece—the guiding star of every so-called successful man in business—the despair of him who takes time to consult anything else than the mighty dollar. As if *Efficiency* were some magic cureall in which there can be no fault. And, as if *Efficiency* were something *new*—a panacea for all economic ills, which had just been discovered.

"Why, *Efficiency,* as a virtue, has been preached from the earliest days of civilization. What established the supremacy of the Pharoahs of Egypt? *Efficiency!* What built up the splendors of Babylon, and graced the courts of Nebuchednezzar and Belshazzar with everything that could satisfy human ambition and lust? *Efficiency!* What power made Alexander the Great the man who stood upon the mountain peak and cried for other worlds to conquer? *Efficiency!* The *Efficiency* of the Caesars accounts for every martyr ever sacrificed to the beasts in the Roman arena for the amusement of the mobs; for that same *Efficiency* knew the psychological value of such methods to keep alive the Roman thirst for human blood, in order that *Efficiency*

might use the aroused mass for further conquests on behalf of the Caesars!

"What made Napoleon the ruthless, self-seeking, blood-spilling leader that he was—drunk with lust for power and wealth? It was his devilish *Efficiency*. Why did our American doughboys leave their homes and families to endure that hell of fire in France? Because a Prussian despot sought to establish world dominion? No! *Because he had proven himself just Efficient enough to make his threats good.*

"*Efficiency* may be a good thing or an evil—it may be a vice or a virtue, depending upon *how it is practiced*, but in itself, like an other method, it is neither good nor evil. It is simply a watch-dog whose business it is to guard against waste. A watch-dog is good in its place—but a watch-dog's office is a ruthless one. It is his business, when an enemy intrudes with an evil design, to remove the maximum of pants in a minimum of time. There are times when it is wise to have a watch-dog—but only a fool would let such a brute loose and unmuzzled to play with the children.

"In our unanimous embrace of mere, hard-boiled *Efficiency*, as an unmixed virtue, we American People are perpetrating an economic sin for which we must pay as sure as there is a God of Justice. We have taken possession of a watch-dog whose reputation for savagery and blood-lust has been established by every conquest in history—now, we are giving him unfettered dominion of our family budget—allowing him to share the baby's plate at the breakfast table. *And we call ourselves Americans.* Shame on our ignorance! It is none the less a crime, for we need not be ignorant con-

cerning these things. It is just another demonstration of the manner in which 'men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil.'"

Here Bender paused and grinned at Darling.

"Speaking of *preaching*, Darling, that's darn good theology."

Darling ran his fingers through his hair, as if to stir some combating argument from the thicket of his senses.

"That is hard argument to meet, I'll admit," he confessed. "If you keep on you'll be making cynics of all of us."

"Call me a cynic if you wish, old man, but remember, when unlovely creatures resort to a masquerade in order to hide their true identities, it takes a certain courage to rip off the masks. He who marries a masquerade beauty at the ballroom is taking an awful chance. When the time comes that we dare not face the facts, then we Americans have surrendered our last and only right to govern ourselves. As defenders of ourselves against outside enemies, we have proven many times that we know how to face guns, bullets and shrapnel, but we have still to prove that we have the nerve to face facts which may reveal us to ourselves as our own worst enemies. *That* takes more courage, any time, than facing an army, because there is no romance or glory in facing one's self and admitting one's own guilt."

"Amen!" boomed Jason in his deep, rumbling voice. "Yore sure a hundred pussent right, son. When it comes to findin' faults, there's a hundred million others in the country—but I'm the nearest. That's *my* idear —and, right now I'm more int'rusted in yore lambastin'

of me than I ever wuz in all yer yappin' at the other fellers."

Bender gave him a look of gratitude.

"It takes a *man* to say such a thing as that, Jason," he cried, fervently. "It hurts to step on your own corns. Believe me, *I know.* If there's anything in God's world I hate to do, after seeing all that I've done in this town, it is to be forced to admit that *Bill Bender* is wrong. I'd rather think it of all the rest of Pomoroy than of *him*—but *he's* the guilty one, and I'm getting ready to swear out a warrant for his arrest right now. *Advertising* is the next point to be considered in this little debate—and that's where *I* come in for mine. I'm not forgetting that I sold the first *real high-pressure advertising* in Pomoroy—*and you merchants were fools to fall for it.*"

Jason astonished the little company by nodding vigorously.

"I'm beginnin' to think so myself lately," he muttered.

Bobbie uttered a little gasp and gave her father a look of reproach, but Bender smiled with evident appreciation.

"I'm glad you feel that way about it, Jason," he thanked him. "It makes this easier to say."

For the third time Bender stared at the fire, while Darling opened a fresh package of cigarettes. Dorothy drew Jason's footstool from the corner and huddled against the fireplace directly facing her employer, as he began speaking.

"Advertising," he mused, "The chief weapon of offense in business today. Much has been said since the days of Washington about the power of the press in

America. Our editorial publications, our news columns, our magazines, our libraries and books—what a mighty influence they wield over our whole gamut of life and living! Then, when we stop to think that what *reading* does in *life*—that is precisely what *advertising* does in *business*. We know what damage poor literature and filthy reading can do in society—and that is just what poor advertising, *false* or *misleading* advertising can do in our system of trade.

"It is an established fact that Big Business today is a firm believer in *advertising*. The masses have regarded this power too lightly, as it effects their individual interests, because *the hand that writes our advertising is the hand that rules the whims of trade, profit and prosperity*. When we stop to think what *advertising* has done in the making of our Fords, and our Wrigleys, and our DuPonts, the building of our gigantic industries, employing millions of workers and feeding more millions of humanity, it staggers the imagination. And *every line of it is subject to purchase by anyone with money*.

"Just now our whole nation is talking of Lindbergh and his marvelous feat. Why? Because of the fame which was given him through the columns of the nation's press. Advertising offers the very same boon to anyone in business who has the means to buy it. The mobs in New York City who were excited to frenzy upon the day of that young hero's return are being daily moved in much the same manner to swarm about the bargain counter in a mad search for alleged economy. Less *spectacular*, perhaps, but none the less *real*.

"Like *Organization* and *Efficiency—Advertising* may be a power for *good*, or a power for *evil*—but its power

is always there. None would wish to thwart it, and any such effort would be futile. All that American People can do, as a self-ruled, self-ruling people, is to demand that its powers shall be released in the right direction, in keeping with the principles of Democracy—the '*Live-and-Let-Live' standard of mass-welfare.*

"Looking at the *advertising* of the syndicate system, we cannot but note one predominant factor—*Price Inducements.* Just read the headlines—*'UNPRECEDENTED SAVINGS'—'AMAZING VALUES' 'NEVER BEFORE SUCH AN OPPORTUNITY TO SAVE MONEY'—'OUR VAST BUYING POWER MAKES THESE PRICES POSSIBLE'—'WHY PAY MORE?'*—we read them every day of our lives. Oh, how they make the price numerals show up. They stick out like a sore thumb on a carpenter. It's *price—price—price!* Quality, service, merchandise descriptions—all secondary. As if the public were buying price-tags instead of merchandise. Sometimes I wonder whether the high-powered advertising men would have us believe that Big Business is really selling us *price tags*, and throwing in the merchandise as a free premium!"

It was time for Darling to be heard again. He had consumed two fags since his last expression and he was ready to burst with the nerve pressure resulting from the stimulant.

"Ye gods, Bender, are you going to try to make us believe that *Economy* is the bunk, too?" he cried. "For heaven's sake, spare us depraved creatures at least *one* virture as a start toward reform."

"Economy, like friendship, is necessary to happy living," replied Bender, throwing a meaning glance in

Bobbie's direction. He wanted her to know that he had not forgotten. "It depends for its value upon this question: *Is it real or imagined?*"

Darling nodded.

"Thanks, awfully, but you *did* give me a terrible fright. Only today I was trying to figure how I would manage to make my old spring suit do another season—and I *would* hate to think myself a criminal for planning such a necessary measure. Go on, big boy!"

Bender continued, while Jason chuckled. Darling certainly knew how to play a "game fish."

"One of the tricks of the syndicate, a very old one, is to advertise certain *specials* or *leaders* at below cost figures. The people, supposing these items to be representative of *all* the prices in the house, would come in for the specials and buy their other needs, too. From the standpoint of *efficiency*, one must admit the practice clever, but it would require a delinquent conscience in business to exonerate it.

"But there is another point in this. Advertising is the power which secures the volume of sales to build up the volume of buying to strengthen the syndicate's buying power. Remember what I said a moment ago about buying power. *Now*, public patronage of any firm or system is the best visible proof of the public's sanction of that firm's or system's policy of business. *SO, ADVERTISING WHICH SECURES PATRONAGE IS SIMPLY THE POWER WHICH ENLISTS THE PUBLIC'S O. K. TO ALL THE ECONOMIC CRIMES WHICH GREAT BUYING POWER MAY PERPETRATE UPON THE MASSES.* In other words, it is the business vote-getter which cleverly in-

fluences the housewife to cast her ballot in favor of a reduction in her husband's income. It baits the farmer into building up the very system which will in turn throttle him, when he stands between that system and more profits. Why, advertising cleverly done will even coax the Independent Merchant to be a traitor to his own interests and fellow tradesmen. If you don't believe it, ask Josh Warner where he bought his new radio set."

"That sure wuz a dirty trick," grunted Jason.

"I wouldn't say that," defended Bender, "Josh was simply fooled by a clever politician of Big Business who calls himself an advertising man. *Now*, I'm getting close home, where the shoe pinches me, but by the grace of God, I'll face the facts and endure the chastisement which correction brings."

Bobbie could witness, better than any of the others, the struggle which was taking place in Bender's mind. His features were writhing as from pain. His face was pale, his eyes troubled. There was an inward battle being fought, no hint of which need be taken from his words, and she felt a sympathetic heart throb for this man who had always seemed so aloof and alone, so hard of exterior, yet so responsive to any appeal to the finer instincts of the heart. *She* knew more about him than anyone else in that party—more, in some ways, she believed, than did Bender himself.

"When I set out to lead the merchants of Pomoroy to better things by the route of high-powered advertising, I did so with the best of intentions. It has been said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and I fear that we now have a little hell of our own,

soon to be realized right here in Pomoroy—and every step of the way we have taken with the best of intentions. No one in this community *means* to be cold and selfish and penny-pinching—but we *are*. The fact that it is not deliberate in no wise alters the effect. In the past two years the *town* has changed, and the *merchants* have changed—and the *people* have changed. Whereas they were once selfish and suspicious and greedy, they have now become *more* selfish—*more* suspicious—*more* greedy. Why? What has wrought the change?"

Jason, who had been nodding vigorously his understanding and agreement, now shrugged his shoulders.

"*I'll* tell you," Bender continued, to answer his own question, "*False education* has done it. Changes are made in us, for better or worse, by education. When we discover that such changes are for worse, we must immediately check up on the textbooks from which our education has been secured. The chief textbook in consumer education is *Advertising*—and, when I look first at the buying habits of our community today, then study the advertising columns of my paper which *I* have sold and supervised and planned, I very easily locate the trouble! Jason, *you advertisers, here in Pomoroy, have made the mistake of copying the syndicate's propaganda, style and methods*—and helping the syndicate to educate the people of this community in a faith and belief in the *LAW OF THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST*. The FITTEST are those with the most POWER—and that POWER is MONEY. Therefore, YOU are the LESS FIT—AND YOU ARE DOOMED BY YOUR OWN DECLARATIONS IF EVER THE SYNDICATE COMES INTO THIS

TOWN AND ESTABLISHES ITSELF ON MAIN STREET. You have been fighting the Devil with fire—the *Devil*, who is *fireproof*—and one of these days you will wonder how you came to be burned. You merchants aren't *fighting with fire*—you're *playing* with it. And I was the one who sold you the idea. Gad, what a fool I've been!"

For a moment Bender dropped his head into his hands, as a deep sigh escaped his lips. Darling dropped one white hand upon one of the broad shoulders.

"Come, come, Old Man," he urged, "It isn't as bad as all that. You're making mountains of molehills. Suppose we *are* a bit nutty about some things in business, nothing has been done that can't be undone. At any rate, you can take consolation in the fact that Little Old Pomoroy has flourished under your evil regime. Perhaps you *have* been a little too zealous on some points, it is only human to err, you know. Mind, I don't say that you *have*, I say *perhaps*. Suppose you *have*—what of it? Take an inventory of the old town, see what you have done that is *good*, just to brace you up, and make you equal to the job of correcting the errors. You can do it. Old Pomoroy is always ready to listen to anything that Billy Bender has to say—and she'll dance to your music. You've got to hand it to Pomoroy—she's some town, and you've made her what she is today."

Bender had risen to his feet, his great height towering over Darling like that of a giant. A long arm went across his comrade's shoulders, while the baby-blue eyes bored into Darling's.

"That's awfully kind of you to say, even though it is short of the actual truth. One likes to hear nice things said of him, especially when he has been sincere in mistakes. But, Boy, I promised that we'd face the facts tonight, and *you* must take *yours* along with Jason and me. The fact of the matter is that *Pomoroy* has deceived herself with her developments and fineries, just as truly as Main Street has been kidding herself about her fictitious prosperity. The evidence which I am about to introduce as proof is going to hurt, Glenn, but you must face it. This is going to test your mettle, but I have come to the point where I can no longer carry on *alone*. There is war ahead, and *this* war will prove to be all that Sherman said of it. I must have a corps of supporters, a fighting staff—and I appointed you a long time ago as my first lieutenant without your knowing it. But I must know whether you can pass the courage test, and I mean to find out, right now."

Bender turned about and stood looking down into the fireplace, his red head bowed, his square chin upon his breast. Darling lighted another cigarette and negotiated a complete circuit of the big room. Jason was watching from the concealment of his shaggy brows the shining eyes of his daughter, as they studied the editor's face which Jason could not see. Only Dorothy Herndon was her normal self, with nothing in her manner to indicate tension, other than the nervous twisting of her handkerchief. The greatest of all battlefields is the human heart, in which faiths and fears engage in conflict, unseen but none the less fraught with pain and heartache. Bender was facing himself and his mistakes —always a battle for the strongest of men; and the

others, realizing that they had precipitated this moment as well as sensing their part in it, awaited the outcome to see if it would be a victory or a Waterloo.

"Yes, I guess Pomoroy has, at last, become resigned to my presence in her midst. In fact, sometimes I almost think she is really satisfied with me. And she's a great old town—and I love her from the bottom of my heart. But I am not satisfied with her."

When Bender had begun speech, Darling quickly returned to the circle. Now, he sat upon the arm of the chair which Bender had vacated, one leg coiled under him, the other stretched before him, watching and listening, a most unusual frown of thought upon his forehead.

"Pomoroy was just a baby when I found her—a little, starving, crying babe. My baby. Lord, how I've worked and slaved for her in the day—and walked the floor with her at night. It seemed to me that she had all the ills of infancy, from colic to teething—and no one seemed to care except myself. The rest of them—those who should have been as interested in her welfare as I—paid no heed, except to yell at her when they tired of her crying. It seemed to me that she cried night and day—but I pulled her through."

Bender had dropped into one of his pensive moods in which he preferred to talk to himself and forget that others heard.

"I pulled her through. Whooping cough, chicken pox, measles, she had them all and *lived*—after others had said that she must die. Now that she has grown to almost her full stature, abloom with health and vigor, one cannot help but share her pride and joy in living.

But when one has sacrificed and suffered to rear his baby, he dare not close his eyes to her frailties and faults, even though she be the apple of his eye. And Pomoroy has them—many of them. I see them now, but I wish I might have seen them before.

"Pomoroy has outgrown the ailments of her babyhood and become just a normal, healthy, active adolescent—a go-getting specimen of flaming youth. Whereas, she was once dependent, she has now become headstrong in the pride of her newfound powers of mind and body. She has cast off her childish ways and yearns to be and do like *big folks* she knows. Her old Town Pump and Bucket Brigade are gone; she now has a *Fire Department* like *cities* have. Her old Community Club has been traded for a *Chamber of Commerce*—with a real *Secretary*—just like the *cities* have.

"It's not that I complain. I *want* her to grow and become a *real city*. That is what I have worked for all this time. But there are other things, less wholesome, that have crept into her schemes—some things that she were much better without. These are her mistaken conceptions about some of the *big things* in life. It's rather that Pomoroy has come to *feel* bigger than she really is. There is always danger in that."

Darling interrupted, a jarring note injected into the tone of the reverie.

"Hey—hey! Don't begin knocking the town, Bill. Razz the merchants if you wish. Goodness knows they have it coming to them. But don't blame the town for what the merchants do or don't do."

"I'm blaming Pomoroy only for that for which she is to blame. She is just a conceited young upstart—

she *feels* big; she *talks* big; she *acts* big; she *thinks* big. She has forgotten her years while she kids herself that she is now *full grown*. When she was small and I caught her in her naughty tricks, I'd take her across my knee and give her a spanking, but she is too big for that now. Yet, she is not nearly as big as she *thinks* she is.

"Why, even our Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce has been caught referring to Pomoroy, not as a village, but as a city. Having been told so, she now believes it. As a result she is given more and more to independent and headstrong ways. She is little short of being an outright rebel, refusing to grant the right of any to question her conduct or interfere with what she considers her own business.

"But I don't care, Darling, whether you like it or not. I'm going to face the facts and so are you. I have been hearing Pomoroy say things of late and I have seen her doing things, which make me suspect that *she is beginning to sow her wild oats*. If my fears are confirmed, I could wish to God that she were the little, crying baby upon my arm again with all her baby ills upon her at once. I think I'd rather she had died in her innocence than to fall into evil ways *now*, if you know what I mean."

Darling shook his head.

"I don't," he replied in an injured tone, "I don't get you at all, Bill. Why, I always thought you the biggest booster in Pomoroy. And you know I have never advocated anything new before first securing *your* endorsement. Failing that, I'd drop it instantly, even though the idea might look ever so good to me. *Now* you con-

tend that we have been all wrong, all the time. That's beyond me, I confess."

"You're wrong again, Glenn, and your very attitude proves my point," he denied. "You accuse me of saying that Pomoroy is *all wrong*. I never said that. I said there were *some* things wrong which would, in time, wreck all the *good* she had done. Glenn, you are just as resentful of correction in your official capacity as Pomoroy is—you hate to hear the truth. I want to call your attention to a few things in order that you may justify them—things which Pomoroy has been guilty of since *you* became her Secretary of Commerce."

Bender began counting his points off upon his fingers.

"Case number one. Do you remember when the Village Council let that job for the painting of the Town Hall—you call it the *City Hall?* Don't you remember how I tried my level best to swing the rest of them in favor of letting the job to a local painter? Why? Because I knew the man wanted to work, and needed the money in his family. But they refused to listen. Why? because a contractor in Capitol City offered to take the job for forty dollars less. Can you justify that?

Darling would have replied but Bender stopped him.

"Just a moment, Glenn. There is another case of the same stripe, but more cold-blooded than that. Last summer we voted to landscape the property which had been donated to the town years ago for a park. We had a young chap in our midst who had been gassed in the war. He was an upholsterer by trade, but the doctor told him he would have to take work outside. So he had taken a complete course in landscaping, and he was ready to take his first job. He made a bid on the

park contract, but he was three hundred dollars high, because, as he showed us, he had figured in certain items which the other contractor had not included. Did he get the job? No, he didn't even have the privilege of amending his bid, on an even basis with the man from Capitol City. An outsider got the job! Justify *that*, will you?"

"Why, *that's* purely a matter of *business*," expostulated Darling. "Certainly, you would not go on record as advocating that the city—"

"—*village!*" corrected Bender.

"You would not contend that the *village*," repeated Darling, "Should pay *more*, and lose money, just to give work to local people, would you?"

"No, hardly that," agreed Bender, "But how much *more* would Pomoroy have paid for that painting job had she let our own townsman have the job at forty dollars more? As it was, last winter, it cost the town more than seventy-five dollars in groceries and clothing for his family. Had he been awarded that contract he would not have had to apply for charity. *I* knew all about conditions when I made my plea on his behalf. Now, I ask you—how much did Pomoroy's Village Council *save* the town?"

"None," confessed Darling. "As a matter of fact, looking at it that way, she lost out."

"Exactly—because she was *too* big—*too businesslike* to allow a matter of sentiment to enter into her calculations. The same applies to the park job. That young man needed the work and he could have met the other man's price, had he been given a chance, but the Council said it wouldn't be *fair* to the other bidder. Conse-

quently, the young man was heartbroken over his disappointment in his own home town. At last, he went back into Blaine's shop, working in the dust and lint of the upholstering room—developed lung infection as the doctor had prophesied—went to the hospital—and *he was buried last week in Capitol City.* One of his last instructions was that he should not be taken back to Pomoroy. Said he couldn't bear the town toward the last, while he was living, and he knew he couldn't stand it to be buried there. But one of the local benefits—the Legion Post—is raising a fund to pay his hospital and funeral expenses, if the government refuses to do so. How much did Pomoroy *save* by her penny-pinching?

"But," argued Darling, "You cite isolated instances. You can't pass judgment or criticism that is based upon individual cases. That isn't just."

"Oh, *isn't* it? Then the *law* isn't just. For even a very exemplary citizen, committing *one isolated* misdemeanor, is brought into court. And *Providence* isn't just—for a motorist who is habitually careful may pay with his life for *one isolated* case of carelessness. Isolated instances *do* count, Darling, and Pomoroy stands guilty as accused."

"Guilty of what?"

"Guilty of devotion to *mammon* and of desertion of the principles of *humanity.* To come back to our original issue of Business, Pomoroy is spending her money at home with Independent Merchants because she can do just as well, economically, here as elsewhere. It is more convenient, and the added trouble of going outside is not justified by the dollars-and-sense saving. But, as I said before, when the syndicate comes into Pomo-

roy, and opens up its places of business on Main Street, you are doomed to a disappointing discovery—the discovery that the people of this community recognize no obligation of loyalty to Pomoroy whatsoever.

"And *we are to blame*, more than anyone else, because it was *our* business to see these things *first*. If we have been ignorant, lax and selfish in our conceits, what can be said of those who cannot be expected to be as well informed as we? I say to you, Glenn—and you, too, Jason—that had we been preaching *Practical Patriotism in Business* instead of *Prices* and *Pennies*, Pomoroy's mental outlook upon her problems today would be more wholesome and healthy than it is today. Our whole community is shot through with the pernicious form of selfishness which seeks savings by the means of *robbing others*, rather than of *denying self*.

"Why, in the old homespun days of colonization, pioneering and frontier settlement, our forefathers were obliged to be thrifty and saving to a greater degree than any of us need go. But *they* denied *themselves*—and we deny the *other fellow*. America is full of people who will cut a fellowman out of his livelihood, if possible, in order to save a few pennies for themselves—or to buy a new car next year. Economy is a good thing, purest virtue, when rightly practiced—but, like all other virtues, it becomes equally great as a *vice* when its virtue has been *prostituted*."

Darling, who had been thoughtful (an unusual thing for him outside his office hours), showed symptoms of returning humor.

"At any rate, it's not really so *serious*—not so serious as one would infer from your pose tonight, Bill.

After all, it's just a case of choosing between *Business* and *Good Business*, isn't it?"

Bender's blue eyes were fastened upon his friend's face with an intensity that Darling could fairly feel.

"I'm sure I don't know what your definition of *seriousness* may be, but if threatened loss of such things as *Competition, Independent Enterprise* and *the right of the Individual to exercise himself in trade*—if these are small matters, then the issue may not be *serious*. If we may lightly sell out the future liberty by which our coming generations may realize a mass-benefit from Business that extends beyond the price of mere bread and butter, then it isn't *serious*. If it means nothing to Pomoroy that twenty-five years hence she may be financially in the clutches of Big Business in New York, Chicago, or other distant cities, then I agree that our present crisis is not *serious*. If we are perfectly content to see our farmers revert to serfdom and peasantry, our armies of workers consigned to a state of servitude in which the dollar is the driver's lash, and our children sentenced to life at hard labor with hope of nothing but a salary or wage—if these are desirable to American People, then it certainly is not *serious*.

"But, if the prospect of building up an Empire in Business is as repulsive to us as the thought of an Empire in Government, then I dare say that we are facing a national crisis that carries in it the direst threat against the fundamental institutions of Americanism in the routine of daily life. The whole issue is just as simple as this:

"*Business is the boss of Government*. We claim devotion to Democracy in Government, yet our daily prac-

tices of indiscriminate patronage are building up an Empire in Business. America *must* learn, and she *will* learn, that *she cannot maintain a Democracy in Government which takes its dictation from an Empire in Business.*

"Patrick Henry could speak to America tonight and condemn the syndicate patrons of the nation without changing a word in his famous challenge, *TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION IS TYRANNY!* Taxation in Business is the profits that are made. By that token profits which are taken out of this community by any firm or system over which the people of this community have no control—those profits represent *TAXATION in which there is NO REPRESENTATION.*

"Now let us modernize Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

"*One Hundred and Fifty years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in LIBERTY,* (Independence—in government OR BUSINESS), *and dedicated to the proposition that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.* No place in that for an Empire, even in Business, is there? *Now we are engaged in a great ECONOMIC WAR, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.*

"There it is, Darling. Is it *serious?*"

Darling tossed another cigarette into the fireplace.

"Bill, you certainly upset my dope about Business and Government, as a partnership proposition," he confessed: 'And it's bitter medicine to have to face the facts. But, by Heaven, I believe you are *right.* Almost thou persuadest me to become an American. I

never thought of this as you have presented it—and it's going to take time to readjust one's vision of it all. But, Bill, I believe you are right about this syndicate system in Business, as you call it. One thing I *know* —either you *are* right, and the trend of modern times is *wrong*, or Patrick Henry was a fossil, Teddy Roosevelt was all wet, and Abe Lincoln a boob."

Jason chuckled.

"I wuz jist thinkin' o' somethin'," he suggested, "when you wuz talkin' about the town givin' contracts to outsiders, jist fer the sake o' savin' a little money out o' the livin' of our own home folks, I got to thinkin'. Most all folks in this section o' the country is Republicans, because they b'lieve in the Tariff. Now, Bender, jist what's the diff'rence between pertectin' American labor, an' industry, an' agriculture ag'in nations that's outsiders, an' pertectin' our own folks ag'in contractors er business that's outsiders to our town?"

"Just this difference," was Bender's answer. "Protection of American capital against foreign competition is *BIG* Business; but the protection of *Community Interests* against *metropolitan invasions* and *syndicate conquest* is LITTLE Business. *Now, do you understand my point, when I said that Pomoroy was too big for her size?* This town, you merchants, our Chamber of Commerce—and even your newspaper and your editor —we've all been a big bunch of chumps. We've talked about *competing* with *Big Business*. Pomoroy has tried to copy the *Big City*. You merchants have tried to copy *Big Business*. And I've tried to put out a *Big Newspaper*, while Darling, here, has tried to make his

institution just as *big* as any other Chamber of Commerce.

"But, until we come to earth, and be just ourselves —just neighbors, as the Good Lord made us to be— we're whipped. You merchants are whipped—Darling's licked—I'm done—and Pomoroy is doomed. *UNLESS . . . Unless* we get back to the old time American principal of *loyalty to principle; Unless* we return to the serious job of being plain, every day *Americans . . . at the counter as well as at the ballot box.*"

Chapter XVI.

A CHIEFTAIN FALLS.

MUCH AGAINST her will, King County was obliged to retain upon her community inventory an institution which had never ceased to be an absolute liability. This institution existed in the form of an isolated little mining settlement, popularly known as Dirty Hollow—an unlovely camp, buried among the hills of the "back-country", which had spent its life living up to all that its name implied.

What Samaria must have been to the pious Jews of Jerusalem, Dirty Hollow had always been to Pomoroy; and it might have been said of the people of Pomoroy, as regards their attitude toward the uncouth inhabitants of Dirty Hollow, that "The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans." To Pomoroy, Dirty Hollow was a civic pariah; so much so, in fact, that she begrudged the loud-voiced, foreign-accent folk even so much as a place at her counters during business hours.

The sole exception to the rule in Pomoroy was Bobbie Baker. It seemed Bobbie's lot in life to be an exception; but she enjoyed it, nevertheless. Be it said of and for Bobbie Baker that whatever instinctive antipathy that one of her type must entertain toward filth (be it mental, moral or physical), she had gone about her self-chosen work in Dirty Hollow bravely and with

enthusiasm. She had now completed her first year of labor on behalf of social uplift in Dirty Hollow, in which she had spent two afternoons each week, and the results were now almost entirely to her liking. Not one who had been witness to her work among the unclean people of the hill district would deny that she had, indeed, worked wonders, especially in the training of the little ones who had been so unfortunate as to be born in Dirty Hollow. Even Dirty Hollow said so, herself . . . and, if ever there were an angel in the flesh, such had Bobbie Baker come to be in the opinions and regards of these slothful but simple people. Not a hovel in the camp in which she was not more than welcome. Bobbie Baker, in the estimations of Dirty Hollow, was grace, beauty, lovliness, incarnate—a princess fit for any fairy tale.

Of course, since Bobbie Baker had become the social evangel of Dirty Hollow; and since she had come to mean as much to Bender as to Dirty Hollow; and since it was only natural that Bobbie Baker should want to bring two such hobbies as Billy Bender and Dirty Hollow together, it was inevitable that Billy Bender and Dirty Hollow should be introduced to each other, sooner or later. But it was equally inevitable, as is always true of rivals where a woman is concerned, that Billy Bender should entertain a certain degree of jealousy toward this unworthy colony of people who weren't fit to touch the hem of her garment. Just as much so, in fact, as it was natural for such a feeling to be mutual—natural for Dirty Hollow, in her turn, to look at Bender out of the corner of her eye, and decide that "he wasn't the one for the Baker gal." To

tell the truth, had it been up to Dirty Hollow to choose one whose measure would equal Bobbie's stature of merit in their eyes, the world could have been scoured in vain for one mortal man who qualified.

Naturally, then, it did not require much urging on the part of Pomoroy's pious souls to secure an editorial expression from Bender in condemnation of certain disturbing elements which claimed Dirty Hollow as their point of origin, but which insisted upon Main Street in Pomoroy as the arena in which they chose to find expression. From time immemorial, Pomoroys' peace had been broken with religious regularity by the restless spirits of Dirty Hollow—"spirits", by the way, which demonstrated more than the legal alcoholic content. Hardly a month went by that some red-eyed denizen of the hills did not come roaring into Pomoroy's midst, thirsting for a fight, and seldom disappointed.

This condition had been calling for improvement, long before Bender had ever come to town; and he had been striving to suppress these regular outbursts of rebellion against restraints of law and order, with all the power and poison of his editorial pen. But in vain. They persisted in growing worse, instead of better—and more frequent, rather than the contrary. In fact, this summer, it was ever so much worse. The disturbances, which had once been mere one-man riots, or two-man-power at most, had now assumed the proportions of gang fights; and Bender decided that it was time to put a stop to the outrage. He had everything set, in his program of preparedness (having given Bobbie no hint of his purpose); and all he lacked, now, was an-

other visitation to make Pomoroy's triumph complete. Dirty Hollow was due for a lesson.

Saturday night arrived; and with it the flower of Dirty Hollow's manhood, primed with the reddest of liquor, and aching for an excuse to start something. It was a night of powerful promise for Dirty Hollow, for Blondy McNeal, her old-time leader, had just returned from a three-year course in one of the state institutions; and, when Blondy McNeal led, Dirty Hollow knew how to follow, to a man. More than twenty strong, these hard-drinking, hard-fighting, double-fisted fellows had already engaged in a parade of the sidewalks of Main Street, watching their chance to "start something"; at the same time, Benders' organized band of defenders-of-the-peace, armed with instructions from the Village Marshal, idled at their points of vantage, waiting for the same.

Bender and Darling had been in conference in the Pilot office, as twilight began to settle over the town, discussing the program of the evening, and the numbers of entertainment which promised to take place.

"Well," concluded Darling, leaving his chair, "guess it's about time something started. It's getting about dark enough for the movies to begin. Guess I'll take a turn about Main Street, and make sure that the reception committee is all set for doing honors to the guests of the evening. So-long! See you later."

"So-long!" responded Bender. "If anything happens, get word to me. I've got some work to get out. After that, I'll be on the street. Tell the Marshal I'm here, so he'll know where to find me, if he needs me."

Darling had gone, perhaps fifteen minutes, during which time Bender had been making a noisy clatter upon his typewriter, when the door opened and a huge, unkempt, roughly clad man slouched into the office. Bender made a quick survey of the man, sensing as he did that there was trouble in the air. Instantly, he noted one striking feature in his visitor—he was hatless, and his hair was a strange, unnatural white, with just a tinge of reddishness at the crown.

"Blondy McNeal," he told himself.

"Reckon yer name's Bender, ain't it?" inquired the stranger.

Bender nodded, little blue pin points of fire showing in his eyes.

"My name's McNeal—call me Blondy, fer short. Jist come over from the Holler to see you, pertic'lar."

"See me?" repeated Bender.

"Yep! That's it. And I reckon to have this here talk real quiet like, too. I ain't talkin' to the whole town, y'u know."

Very coolly, the ruffian turned the key in the lock, and faced his host to take a chair. Leaning back against the wall, he deliberately placed both rough-shod feet upon the proof table, from which position he regarded Bender through half closed eyes.

"They been tellin' me that you been hornin' in quite consider'ble on the booze business, lately. Kinda wantin' the runners an' bootleggers run outa the county. That right?" he asked, his voice surprisingly smooth and soft for such a type.

"No, hardly that," denied Bender.

The visitor's eyelids flickered over so little.

"Ain't backin' up, are you?" he sneered.

Bender's eyes squinted the least bit.

"I kinda thought you would," McNeal went on, as Bender remained silent. "That's why I come over."

"I was expecting you," was Benders' reply. "This is my busy evening; so, whatever you have to say, make it snappy!"

"Expectin' me, eh?" mused the ex-convict. "How come?"

"Oh, I thought you'd be just fool enough to try one of your famous blazers on me," retorted Bender, a rise of insolence in his tone. "Come on—shoot! I'm waiting,"

McNeal's hard gaze narrowed still more.

"I reckon you don't know me, Big Boy," he purred, "or you wouldn't say that!"

Bender's lip curled.

"Oh, dont' I? Then I'll have to set you right on that point. You are Blondy McNeal, ex-convict number forty-six-ninety-two, released last Tuesday. You went over the road for three years on a proven charge of statutory offense, committed while you were engaged in rum running from Capitol City to Dodge. Ten years ago, you were state heavy weight champion, under the name of Bucky McNeal. Your last honest occupation was held in the employ of the Mid-State Coal Company, in Dirty Hollow, driving a team of mules at the mine. You're supposed to be an ear-chewing bad man, with a particular taste for whiskey and women. Outside of that, I don't know much about you."

McNeal grinned unpleasantly.

"You *do* know me, now, don'tcha?" he jeered. "Wal, that's good. Saves a lot o' time. Now, Bender, what

I come over to tell you is jist this. Don'tcha be too rambunctious about this here liquor business—see? We ain't askin' you t'do nuthin' fer us; but they ain't gonna be no monkeyin', neither. Jist fegit it! If you don't . . . "

McNeal ended with a rising inflection freighted with suggestion. Bender's jaw came up with a snap.

"Well? If I don't . . . what?" he bit out.

Blondy shrugged.

"Oh, you *won't!*"

"Oh, murmured Bender, in mock understanding, "I guess *you* don't know *me, McNeal.*"

The bully's eyelids dropped to their former narrowness. He was on the verge of reply, when someone tried the door. Bender quickly answered the summons, turned the key and opened. It was Dorothy Herndon.

"I forgot my purse," she explained, hurrying past him toward her desk. Bender had followed closely behind her, in time to note the effect of her presence upon his visitor. McNeal had come to his feet, a bold smile upon his face, as he made a low bow to the girl.

"Why, hello, cutie! I ain't seen you since the dance that night before I went away. How's tricks, eh? You ain't changed yer mind, none, yet, have you?"

For the first time, the girl took notice of him; and her face paled.

"Oh . . . you!" she panted, casting an appealing look toward Bender.

But Bender had already determined upon action. Seizing the offensive guest by the collar, he pushed him toward the door, his eyes spitting blue flame.

"Look here, McNeal! For the first and last time I tell you to get out of here and out of town!" he muttered between set teeth. "Get out, or I'll drag you out—and don't let me ever hear of you addressing this girl or any other lady of my acquaintance against her wishes!"

McNeal shook off the hold as a mastiff would shake off a poodle.

"*Lady!*" he sneered "*Lady!* Why *she* ain't no . . ."

Bender delivered an untimely punctuation to the remark, in the form of a left drive which landed squarely upon the full foul lips. Surprised for the moment, the giant staggered back against the wall, rebounding with a roar and coming to a clench with his antagonist. Together, they swayed back and forth about the room, each locked in the other's embrace. Dorothy uttered a scream, and ran through the door and down the street. For a moment, there was no sound in the little office, except the hard breathing of the struggling combatants. Then, with a mighty heave, McNeal lifted Bender clear of the floor and hurled him into the corner. There was a crash, as an overhead cabinet, loosened from its hangings, came tumbling down upon Bender, completely covering him with a deluge of newspapers, magazines and books.

There was a thrashing about in the depths of the debris, and Bender came to his feet, a tiny trickle of blood running down the side of his face. Again, they grappled; and again, a crash, this time accompanied by a jingling of broken glass, as McNeal catapulted backward through the doorway into the street, taking the door, which the fleeing girl had left half closed, completely from its hinges.

With tigerish quickness, Bender had leaped through the opening, landing directly upon his fallen foe. Seizing him by the collar, he pulled him to his feet, and delivered another smashing blow full in the face.

Already, figures were to be seen running toward the scene of the fight. All Main Street, already on a triger edge of preparedness for a riot call, had been quickly aroused by the terrified cries of the frightened girl. As the bloody but triumphant Bender stood, reeling and panting over the prostrate form of the fallen bully, Darling, ever to be seen in the lead when a fight promised, reached his comrade's side.

"Look out for the gang!" he yelled to the Marshal who followed at his heels. "This is the start of it! And Bill's hurt! Say, Old Man, what's the fuss? Why didn't you tell me this would be the way you would start the program? Eh? Ain't much hurt, are you, Bill?"

Bender, wiping the blood from his face, assured him that it was "only a scratch." Meanwhile, a crowd had been gathering in a circle, with Bender and his victim, Darling and the Marshal in the center. All attention was being directed toward Bender who was still bleeding. Not until someone cried out in warning, did they realize that McNeal had revived and regained his feet. As the shout was uttered, Darling turned to see McNeal in a crouch, ready to spring upon Bender's back.

"Bill! Look out! *And he's got a knife!*"

As McNeal hurled himself at Bender, there was a gleam of steel, reflecting the light of the street lamp overhead, as the fighter struck—and missed! For Bender, slipping sidewise as he turned, had narrowly evaded the thrust of the weapon. Again, they closed,

this time in a frenzy of motion. No close grips, no straining of poses. Before, it had been muscle against brawn; now, it was science against steel.

"Get back!" yelled Darling, his voice pitched to a scream. "Don't!" he pleaded, as someone would have attempted interference. "Watch your chance, Marshal, and nail him! Tap him on the dome with your gun! The rest of you get back . . . 'way back . . .and give 'em room!' '

During this supervision, Darling had detected another movement in the crowd. Certain unshaven faces were to be seen in the circle. Seizing one of the Marshal's two guns, Darling waved it about him in a complete circle, covering the entire crowd.

"Not a one of you moves!" he cried. "The first one of you bozos that tries anything is going to stop lead—and it'll be red hot! Get back, I tell you . . . dammit . . . *get back!*"

While all this had been going on, a grim drama was being enacted beneath the arclight. Bender, caught off guard and unarmed was at a disadvantage in the first struggle—but not for long. As he caught the wrist, in which hand the deadly blade was held, he turned his back to his foe, bringing the arm around his side, the hand in front of him. It was now, for the first time in his life, that he put to serious work the knowledge and skill which he had acquired in earlier years, when he had all but mastered the art of Japanese wrestling at the "Y" gym in Capitol City. His left leg came up; the armed limb was brought down sharply over the thigh, as one would snap a stick over the leg. The bully's nerveless hand loosened its grasp and the weapon

dropped to the pavement, to be promptly confiscated by the Marshal.

For a two-second twinkling, there seemed to be a veritable volcano of action in the struggling pair. Again, Bender seized a hairy wrist, while the bewildered bully struggled blindly to obtain the equilibrium which he had lost so suddenly and mysteriously. Then, with a snakelike agility, Bender's long figure measured itself, full length, upon the ground, as he jerked his antagonist helplessly upon him. As McNeal came tumbling upon him, Bender planted his foot on Blondy's broad chest. There was a downward twist of the arm, and an upward heave as he straightened his leg; then, McNeal, released entirely from Bender's hold, was hurtled, head high, through the air, to land in a heap fully fifteen feet away, where he huddled at the very edge of the widened circle. There was a groan—and all was still.

Quick as a flash, Bender had regained his feet; then, assured that it was all over, he wiped his bloody face upon his shirt sleeve. His breath came in whistling gasps; for a moment, he reeled uncertainly, when Darling caught his arm and assisted him into the office.

"Some . . . man!" Bender was muttering, as if to himself. "Good thing . . . I knew something—about Jap science, eh?—Hated to do it . . . killed him, maybe . . . had to, though . . . Get the doctor . . . he's hurt . . . must be . . . That was . . . the chest throw I used . . . sorry. But I . . had to."

Chapter XVII.

A LADY PROSPECTS.

IT WAS Sunday morning; and Bobbie had been thinking—thinking hard. All last night, until into the morning, having heard the details of the duel between Bender and the Bully of Dirty Hollow, she had pondered this problem which had puzzled her more each succeeding day, of late. Ever since that evening of the "bridgeless party", as Darling had afterward called it, Bender had been much in her mind.

The persistence of this subject in claiming her thoughts did not arouse any particular curiosity on her part. Had she wondered about it at all, she would have told herself that it was because she was interested so intensely in the work in which he was engaged, and the cause in which he had enlisted his powers. Such is the evasiveness of the feminine, where and when facts are concerned which might prove embarrassing to oneself.

This morning, she had continued to puzzle her brain about Bender. Why this fighting of his against a system or a condition which he hated, when he must know that it was inevitable? Of course, she had told Darling why; but she had never been able to satisfy herself as to the real reason. Then, too, why should Bender *hate* this system? Was it simply the patriotic phase of it? She knew it was not. There was some reason, more concrete and more personal, that must

account for the now unaccountable hatred which Bender entertained against what he had chosen to term the Syndicate System.

Of course, everything he had said that night of the party had been true—every word of it. But that was not sufficient explanation for her. There was a story, somewhere in Bender's past. She *knew* it. There had been so many little things that had told he so—little things that only a woman would notice.

There had been the occasion of their first acquaintance, for instance; and his remarks concerning friends and friendship. She still remembered how *hungry* the look in his eyes had been, when he had spoken of *real* friendships; and how he had shrunk from the suggestion, a moment later, that *surely he* had friends of his own. She could see him, yet, as he paced the little office in the grip of secret feelings, aroused by the mere mention of *his* friends.

"Why?" she asked herself, and, again. "Why?"

Then, there had been that other remark of his. She recalled it word for word; "*That's the sort of friend which you are to your friends,*" was what he had said. "*And you'll fight for them. Such friends I have never known. I think I'd go through hell for just one friend like that.*"

Now, just what sort of experience in life could cause a man to talk like that? He had meant every word of it, too. She knew that. And he had been such a big, hungry, boy of a man, when he had said it. She had seen that same look which he had given her, in the face of a little newsboy in Capitol City one day, as he stood outside in the rain, his little freckled nose pressed flat

against the window, gazing at a display of pastries and confectionery.

Another thing. Bender was not given to the use of terms and expressions about which he knew nothing. When he said he'd go through *hell* for a friend, he had *meant* it; and if Billy Bender meant *that*, then Billy Bender must have had something very like a *hell* in his own past.

It was now time for church; and promptly at the usual time, Dorothy's "yoo-hoo" could be heard from the front yard. A minute later, these two girls were walking down the street, arm-in-arm and in step, the yellow head and the darker one offering a strange contrast in color for such a sameness in height, and such a oneness in mind. Before they had gone two doors from the Baker yard, the conversation had gone to Bender and the fight of the night before. Each had her interest in the incident for her own various reasons; but they were interests in common.

"Oh, it was awful!" exclaimed Dorothy. "And all over *me*, too."

The baby blue eyes studied Bobbie's face in a side-long, covert way.

"Believe me, Billy Bender's *some man*, and I don't mean maybe!"

No results.

"Believe me, I'm not so easy to interest, when it comes to men. I'm wise at my age. But I must confess that I wouldn't be above trying to learn to like a man like Billy Bender, real seriously, if he should ever show the symptoms that Glenn Darling has been showing for the past two or three years."

Dorothy smiled to herself. The tiny pucker of tightness about the lips had told her that Bobbie had *heard*, and that she had certain ideas of her own, on the subject of Billy Bender. Satisfied on that score it was time to move to safer footing.

"You know, Glenn's been fluttering about all this time; and he doesn't know *yet* where to put his hands and his feet when I'm around."

Apparently, Bobbie preferred the change of subject.

"What's the matter with you and Glenn, anyhow, Dot? Glenn's a dandy fellow; and he just worships the ground you walk on."

It was Bobbie's turn to study under cover the effect of the suggestion. Dot's face was turned ahead; and the blue eyes were a bit hard, despite the careless tone in which she replied.

"Oh, I suppose he does; but he'll recover. I can't hurt him *too* much; though mercy knows I wish I could ditch him . . . he's such a pest. Anyway, I'm not the marrying sort, Bob."

Bobbie made no reply. She merely tucked the last remark away in her memory for future reference. That had not been the first time Dot had said that very thing.

"I'm awfully sorry the thing happened," declared Dorothy a minute later, when the conversation had returned to the subject of the fight. "I'm afraid that McNeal may try to get even with Billy for the way he beat him up. They say that McNeal is that kind . . . he never forgives an enemy or forgets a grudge."

Bobbie forced a laugh. She had not missed Dorothy's bit of probing; and she wanted to give her to under-

stand that she was not personally interested in Bender, except as a member of their little circle of friends.

"Oh, Billy seems very capable of taking care of himself. Judging from reports, at any rate."

* * * * *

Bobbie had scarcely thought that Bender would be present in church that morning, despite the fact that he was almost a perfect attendant both morning and evening; but he was there, displaying no evidences of the events of the night before, beyond a tiny plaster of white, high up near the hair above the left temple. There was something funny about Bender's church attendance. He always found a place where he could watch Bobbie Baker; Bobbie had been told so by more than one who had noticed. What was more, Bobbie had noticed that he seemed to be watching her more than the preacher—and she told herself that she didn't like it. Yet, he had ever been aloof, never thrusting himself upon her, or even daring to approach her. Never had he taken the initiative in any of their contacts, choosing, rather to await such circumstances as would voluntarily throw them together—or (she admitted, in self reproach) such times as *she* should volunteer an approach, such as the "bridgeless party", for instance.

That Sunday morning brought a surprise to Bobbie Baker. When she emerged from the church doors, who should be waiting for her but Billy Bender.

"May I have the rare pleasure of walking home with you this morning?" he pleaded with a smile in his eyes.

Bobbie deliberately hesitated, and laughed to herself at his instant consternation. Billy Bender was no comedian; but there were times when he could be un-

intentionally funny. And it is always funny to the feminine when a man who is exceedingly strong, exceedingly tall, exceeding good looking and exceedingly masculine, can be reduced to hopeless, helpless confusion.

"Why, of course, you may! Where is Dot? Have you seen her yet?"

"Oh, Glenn carried her off, long ago."

Bobbie laughed, as she dropped in step with him.

"Glenn is very persistent, isn't he?"

"Well, rather!" agreed Bender, almost grimly. "There are times when I wish I had his nerve."

Bobbie glanced, involuntarily at the little white plaster at the temple.

"Oh, I don't know!" she doubted, "I think Billy Bender has *his* nerve too, on occasion."

Bender reddened slightly, despite the squaring of his jaw.

"There's nerve—and *nerve*," was his vague reply.

For a time, they walked in silence. Then, as they neared the Baker residence, Bobbie spoke.

"I was just wondering whether you wouldn't enjoy a little missionary work?" she suggested.

Bender laughed.

"Ordinarily, I confine my missionary work to business hours," he said, "but there are exceptions, and this is one of them. Just what sort of missionary work might I be qualified to do?"

"Every Sunday afternoon, I spend an hour or so with a little invalid girl . . . Milt Harris' adopted child. She is such a little sunbeam, and she suffers so much. I thought you might like to make her acquaintance. She does me worlds of good, just to talk to her;

and I'm sure you would love her at first sight. Betty is a most remarkable child in many ways; and I want you to meet her. Will you go?' '

"*Will* I?" he murmured, with a leap of startled joy in his voice. "Nothing can keep me from it. Just name the hour and minute and make it early."

Bobbie, her head tilted sidewise, could watch his face. She had caught that strange, fleeting expression of boyish hunger, as it flitted across the features. Again, the projector of memory threw upon imagination's screen the picture of the little newsy, with his freckled nose flattened against the bakery window.

It was a very emotional girl who hurried into the house and tripped up the stairs to Bobbie's room. As she tossed purse and scarf upon the bed, and stepped to the mirror to arrange her hair, a storm of conflicting feelings seethed within her. What would people say—what must he *think* of a girl who would, a second time, throw herself at a man's head, when he, himself, had never made any approach to her, after a chance exchange of confidences at first acquaintance? And *that* two years ago!

"I suppose I am a big ninny," she told herself. "But I *had* to do it. *He* never would. For two years, he has been watching me—I've caught him at it—yet, he has never said a word, or made one advance. It isn't that he is bashful. It is some twist of mind or soul which is keeping him from being the man he was designed to be. He has never found *himself;* and he will never be happy until he does. And I mean to help him, if I can . . . and, if I can't, Betty can. He just can't help loving Betty. If ever she gets her arms around Billy Bender's neck, he'll never be the man he was before."

Chapter XVIII.

THE MINISTRY OF SUFFERING.

MILTON HARRIS belonged to the world's most tragic class of humanity. He was a "misfit". From the very first, he had been the victim of of a conspiracy of the fates. Delicate in body, but with a mind of matchless powers, he had never been able to be anything but "just a farmer." Primarily a thinker by nature, and a student by training, his career should have been carefully ordered along paths leading in the direction of classrooms, and books, and degrees—and ending at a seat in some university. As it was, before he had been able to cast off the galling harness which held him to the life of his nativity, he had been made the sole support of a widowed mother, and placed in charge of the old homestead. Before "mother" had died, Milton had taken certain matrimonial obligations, as a consequence of which there had never ceased to be very good, economic reasons for his remaining just what he had started out to be, against his will—a farmer.

It was no wonder that a man of his sensitive nature should read the writings of *other* thinkers . . . men like himself who were dreamers; but who, unlike himself, had been privileged to follow courses of their own choosing, and dig deep into unexplored realms of thought—and should beat in vain the bars of necessity which separated him from that atmosphere which had always constituted

his heart's desire. Milt Harris, with his slight frame and prodigious mind, knew better than anyone else that he had been made for better things than he had ever known; and, because he *was* a thinker—because he *did* go deep into the questions of life . . . but, because he had become warped in his views and visions of living—because of these, Milt Harris had become a curiously minded creature . . . a cross between a rebel and a cynic. As Dad Shanks liked to say, "Milt Harris is half-way between a Democrat and a Bolshivik"

Some people, who had never studied the man, had said that Milt Harris was the "biggest crank", and the "worst crab" in several counties; but this was because they had never come to know him by any other means of identification than his face. *That* was sour enough, indeed. But it was no wonder, considering what he had always had to face. As little Betty knew him, Milton Harris was the noblest of men . . . kind, sympathetic, patient. And Milton was all of that, and more, toward those whom he liked . . . but the trouble was that he hated so many, and liked so few!

Speaking of Betty brings into the picture the only sunshine that had ever come into Milton's gloomy, sordid, ingrown life. Denied a child of his own flesh and blood, Milton Harris had resigned himself bitterly, after ten years of hoping, to the forlorn lot of childlessness, as just another disappointment to be added to a host of hopes already blasted. Then, one morning, upon opening the kitchen door, he had found a basket upon the step. Investigation revealed the contents to be a tiny, red faced and exceeding lusty voiced girl-baby . . . and Milton quickly hugged the little blessing to

him, and appropriated it as his own, even before he had solicited the ready consent of his patient, gray haired wife.

She and the rest of the world had soon learned to call the little stranger by her proper name . . . Betty; but Milton had named her "Sunshine", upon the first cloudy morning . . . and "Sunshine" she had always been to him. A happy choice, as it afterward developed; for upon one occasion, when Betty had consulted the mirror and discovered no likeness there to either father or mother, she had asked with childish directness how she had come to them. And it had been Milton who had quickly explained that she had arrived precisely like *all* sunshine comes—that she had simply dropped down out of a blue sky. And, because he had always told her the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, she had never discussed the matter again.

Scarcely three years had passed, before another installment in Milton's seemingly unending train of misfortunes descended upon him, and placed its finger upon the apple of his eye. Betty became afflicted with a strange malady which had come and gone without allowing itself to be studied by the doctors—and Betty had been left behind a hopeless cripple, never to walk again. Day after day, during the five years that had followed, Little Betty had been a sufferer . . . the patient, ever-smiling kind of sufferer whose very sunshine cuts to the heart. Many a time, when those racking pains would come, and the slender body would fairly writhe in the agony of torture, two luminious eyes would gaze up at him through their tears—and smile the love she couldn't speak. In such moments, Milton Harris would

leave the room, pace the porch in the grip of terrific ragings of inward emotions, and mutter muffled curses that were as futile as they were dire.

Betty had suffered a particularly hectic morning; and Milton had paced the front porch more feverishly, swearing more profusely, than usual. But, as the afternoon came, and the pains passed, a peaceful calm prevaded the bright room of the little invalid. Milton, who had known nothing about flowers until Betty had expressed a love for them, had gathered two fresh bouquets from the extravagant garden while Betty had watched him from the big window; and, now, as Betty waited for the regularly scheduled Sunday afternoon visit of "Aunty Bob", the faint perfume that floated to her nostrils suggested a foretaste of the heaven which Aunty Bob's coming always held for her.

Finally, a car—a strange one to Betty—drove into the yard; and Aunty Bob alighted, followed by a tall man whom Betty had never seen before. Betty didn't like that so well. She preferred that Aunty Bob should come alone. But, perhaps the man would tarry outside, and talk to Daddy . . . she hoped so. Yet, there was no modification of her warm extended welcome when Aunty Bob appeared, with the strange man at her side, in the doorway.

It was a sweetly pathetic picture upon which Bender gazed, as Bobbie bent over the little form. Two slender arms twined about her neck; and, while her face was buried in the rich, dark tresses that flowed over the snowy pillow, soft lips caressed her cheek.

"You never forget to come, do you, Aunty Bob?" crooned the child, as she patted Aunty Bob on the

shoulder, "and you brought some more pretty Sunday School papers and picture cards?"

"Yes, darling! A whole bundle of them!"

"I'm glad!" cried Betty, happily. "Because Mother just read the last old one to me yesterday. Daddy tried to; but, when he started to read one about Jesus taking the little children in his arms, he almost choked. He went out and walked on the porch, again. Aunty Bob . . . what makes Daddy swear, when he feels sorry for me?"

So the conversation rambled on for several minutes. Then, Bobbie decided it was time to introduce an opening to the conspiracy she had plotted. Turning to Bender, she started to speak, but stopped short. There, before her, stood a tall, rugged man . . . one whom she had once described to herself as "hardboiled" . . . with frank, shameless tears coursing down his cheeks. Apparently, he was unaware of the fact that he had been crying. Billy Bender in tears! For a moment, Bobbie stood undecided . . . then, gathering her wits, as she beheld the big, round, questioning eyes of Little Betty upon her, she placed a light hand upon Bender's arm and lead him to the bedside.

"Billy, this is Betty Harris—Betty, I want you to meet a new friend of mine. This is Mr. Bender; and, after you become acquainted with him and decide that you want him for a friend, too, I'll let you call him Uncle Bill."

It had all been a bit awkward for her—more difficult than she had expected, this introducing of a big, strong man to a little invalid child. Especially, when the big, strong man insisted upon crying. But Bender made it

astonishingly easy by doing a most astonishing thing. Slowly approaching the bedside, he first took the little, bony hand in his great palm. Betty studied him, with neither a word nor a smile, as he stood looking down into her upturned face. Then, dropping to one knee, he pressed the hand to his lips. After another long moment, the other came up and stroked the bent, red head.

"I hope that you *will* let me be your friend, Betty!" Bender was saying.

Slowly, the hand dropped from the red head to the broad shoulder and slipped about his neck. The other arm joined in the embrace. The red head bent still nearer her face, until a kiss has been placed upon the pallid forehead . . . and the deed was done!

* * * * *

It was a very happy but silent Bobbie Baker who rode back to Pomoroy, beside a still more silent Bender at the wheel. Things had turned out better than she had dared hope! Now, she had much to think about —this business of a strong, silent man crying at sight of a little crippled child. *Here* was a side of him that she had never seen—never suspected. What sort of psychological phenomenon did he present, anyhow? She had thought this first meeting might furnish a key; instead, it had only deepened the mystery; but she was happy, nevertheless, for intuition seemed to tell her that if she would but give Little Betty time, the child would do her work well. Betty would require some time—and, anyway, there would be plenty of time—and plenty more trips to Betty's house.

Throughout the evening service, Pomeroy's most popular pair of young people sat under the Gospel message, apparently unaware of the surprised and curious glances of the congregation. Each must have been occupied with private thoughts, for neither gave a hint of recognition to the other's presence, until the service had closed. Not until Bender bade her a sober good night at the Baker door, did he refer to the events of the afternoon. Then, very simply, he said. "This has been the happiest day of my life. For years, I have prayed and waited, that I might have *just one real friend.* I now have *two*—Heaven's measure is sometimes slow, but always double! God has been good; and you have been kind! I thank you both! Good night . . . Little Pal!"

Though he left her on the instant, swinging off into the night, Bobbie Baker did not close the door until the soft purr of a motor had died away in the next block. Then, turning the key in the lock, she leaned back against the wall of the little hall, and closed her eyes, while an inward tumult returned to a normal calm.

"Billy Bender, I don't know, yet, what manner of man you are; but I mean to find out," she whispered. "And what Jason Baker's daughter starts, she finishes. But, one thing I *know*—you are not a flatterer—and you called me *Little Pal.* It's a big job, Billy Bender, but I'll do my best—even if I have to *ask* you, again!"

Chapter XIX.

MOBILIZATION.*

ANOTHER year had passed; and 1928 was grinding out its double quota of events that would go down in the pages of Democracy's History. The imperial forces of Syndicatism in Enterprise were massing their powers with quiet, treacherous but immaculate precision. The arch-conspirators in Oil had seen their strength threatened with the Independent Revival which followed upon the heels of a federal investigation of the Fall-Sinclair infamy and the "Seminole Wildcat" episode. But, a general slashing of prices by the centralized directors in Oil had sufficed to whip the competitive Independent operators into submission; and prices had begun to climb, again, to their former extortionate level.

Meanwhile, mergers and combines had multiplied, over and over again, until their multitudes became a flood. Industry, Merchandising and Production had become so intertwined that a hopeless entanglement of secret alliances had developed. Railroads were involved, until it had become a problem of the manufacturers who still

(*) Developments which actually occurred in 1926, 1927 and 1928 in various parts of the country are depicted in this chapter. The growth of the syndicate system in business is here treated, without the least exaggeration. Every specific instance related in this chapter has already transpired in real life, exactly as described. Many of them, the reader who is a student of current events will readily identify in his own memory.

THE AUTHOR

insisted upon keeping their own independence—not alone to compete with their pirate rivals, but actually to obtain service from the common carriers on an equality with that given the adherents of Big Business. So critical had the situation become that the largest Independent Motor maker bought outright an entire railroad to seal his protection on this score.

Large Mail Order houses performed a shift to Chain Store distribution. An outstanding Ohio manufacturer of men's clothing extended his sales campaign into the establishment of a chain of stores through which the product was sold direct to the public on the claim that it "saved the consumer money" by "eliminating the middle man's profits." The word, "Chain", was upon every tongue; the "Bargain Counter" had become the outstanding American institution. A nation of self-ruled people had become intoxicated with the wine of immediate economy until any means of saving money had become legitimate and proper, notwithstanding the hardships wrought, or the consequences inevitably laid in store for the future.

The craze, created by the price boasts of syndicates in every line of business, rapidly became a state of frenzy. Independent Merchants, who had always maintained the economic position that every item should pay its own profits, were caught in the tide, or forced to follow the lead, in a desperate effort to "compete". Every little store began spilling printer's ink with lavish emphasis upon the PRICE. Price numbers were ordered in the largest type obtainable—*quality, service, merchandise* being treated in print that required spectacles, or omitted entirely for lack of space. Publications bulged

with advertising volume; printeries sprang up with mushroom rapidity; mail boxes overflowed with a miscellany of "dodgers" and "circulars"; and no village or city lawn could be kept free of the nuisance of papers driven in the wind. The very air had become fairly charged (figuratively and literally) with *prices—prices* and more *prices*—and *savings always!*

Did it matter to a consuming public who must earn before it might spend—this price-piracy in trade? No! Anything to save money . . . just so one might buy a given thing for less . . . be it ever so poorly made, or unprofitably marketed, it was *good* if it were only *cheaper*. No thought to mathematics—the certainty that a thing which *sells* for less must be *made* for less, and *of* less material which, in turn, must be bought from the producer for *less!* The downward trend of prices on merchandise was hailed with popular chants of thanksgiving; while the more drastically downward prices on labor's toil, and farmer's crops were deplored with equal fervor. But *that there was any connection between the two trends did not seem to dawn upon the mind of a people who claimed to be fit to run their own affairs.*

If any difference among the professions and trades existed, it was to be said that the farmer was the most ready customer of the growing trend in Business. Big Business found in the farmer an open ear for *cheap prices;* but, when, for instance, Chain Stores in 1928 purchased the first haulings of Michigan-grown early potatoes at $2.75 per barrel and sold the same potatoes from the stores *the very following Saturday* at 19c per peck (8½c per peck less-than-cost), the farmer saw

the price drop to 68c per bushel, almost overnight. Then, he wept hot tears of rage and swore that there "ought to be a law against it" . . . cried the more loudly for "Farm Relief." Government aid became the battle cry of the farmer—the while he continued to patronize the system which had contributed the most generously to his predicament.

Issues were flying thick and fast. A double farce was staged in July of that year—one at Kansas City, the other at Houston. Two men were nominated for the White House; the one a Republican, the other a Democrate; the one a Protestant, the other a Catholic; the one a "dry", the other a "wet"; the one a business man, the other a professional politican. Every possible issue was raised, except the *real issue*, the "Economic War" that was to be the acid test of Democracy in Business and Prosperity. Religion and Prohibition were the issues over which the masses exchanged words—and blows—before the day of election; but of the *real issue* to be settled, nothing appeared in either candidate's platform or expression. So a public argued its religious or prohibition sentiments, while it waited its turn at the "Bargain Counter", or continued its headlong rush in search of "savings" that had never existed, and never could, without an overthrow of the principle of Independence of the Masses in Business.

Manufacturers who were employers of men, whose wage represented all there was for the children to enjoy at home, had been feeling the pressure of the Syndicate which always demanded its added discounts and special allowances over and above the regular terms of sale. *Now*, the syndicate began telling the manufacturer how

much he must charge for his product. If the syndicate could not purchase his products as *cheaply* as it could make them itself, the syndicate promptly began making the article itself, even if forced to purchase the manufacturer's holdings by outright transaction. In order to sell *cheaper*, the syndicate must buy *cheaper*, or make its own.

Moreover, the larger Chains, who had forced a vast army of Independent Merchants out of the running of "competition", now were *erecting their own warehouses* to eliminate the jobber and wholesaler, thereby paving the way for the elimination of the balance of the Independent Retailers, not by "competition", but by *cutting off their source of supply.* This activity on the part of the "Empire in Business" was called "Efficiency" and "Good Business" by the very people who had only a decade before stood aghast at the atrocity of the German Submarine program of warfare, whose aim was nothing short of the same in principle.

Nor did it stop with this. Larger Chains began buying out smaller ones, and consolidations began to multiply. There could be but one aim in view—*the elimination of competition.* And, from the elimination of competition must come *a repeal of the Law of Supply and Demand.* Big Business was driving its body blows home with the ruthlessness of a Ceasar or a Napoleon, leaving Independent Enterprise a bleeding, bruised and battered victim of Public Ignorance of Facts, plus Popular Price Intoxication. And this in a land where the citizen is sovereign, and the people rule! This from a people, always ready to blame their plight to "crookedness in politics"—even though it be the direct result of

"crookedness" in their own reason or absence of reason!

It was only in 1928 that the farmer, generally, began to realize that he needed "Farm Relief", not because he had been made to suffer for the sins of others, but because he had been caught in a trap of his own making. He had patronized a system which now deliberated the best means of using the profits from his business to beat him into submission. Syndication in Industry and Merchandising must inevitably bring syndication in farming; and no earlier than October of 1928, did the following statement appear in public print:

> What farming may be today when conducted on business principles you may learn most easily by reading what Robert Stewart, Dean of the Nevada College of Agriculture, tells in the June *Atlantic* about the Campbell Corporation with 95,000 acres and not a horse on the place; its 109 tractors, capable of plowing a thousand acres a day; its 100 planting machines, capable of planting 3,000 acres a day; its 80 binders capable of cutting 1,700 acres a day; its 11 threshers, capable of threshing 20,000 bushels of wheat a day. (*)

All that Big Business had brought to the Independent Manufacturer and the Independent Distributor now threatened the Independent Farmer. His economic misdeeds were to be visited upon his own head. Industry had been conquered; Merchandising had been enslaved —now, Big Business, looking with covetous eyes upon the land, itself, saw further possibilities for added profits.

(*) Page 147, "NATION'S BUSINESS" (Magazine), October, 1928, Published by the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, Washington, D. C. Title, "The Farm of Tomorrow," by Edwin E. Slosson, Director, Science Service, Washington, D. C.

Big Business had but to continue a little longer, giving out more *cheap prices—cheaper, if necessary*—to bait an Independent People into selling out the economic freedom which had been sanctified by human blood, spilled in six wars, every one of which had been fought by the masses for the principle of Independence.

A self ruling people, making merchandise of its liberties! Then, justifying its craven greed on the ground that "everyone else was doing it!" Pomoroy's old psychology had become the psychology of the nation —"*Everyone else is to blame but me.*" . . . A mass of 120,000,000 self-ruling people who could not rule their private greed and lust for profits that belonged to others of their kind—a *SOB-SQUAD* OF SOVEREIGN CITIZENS IN WHOSE HANDS HAD FALLEN THE ECONOMIC DESTINY OF A DEMOCRACY, IN THE ESTABLISHMENT AND DEFENSE OF WHICH UNTOLD THOUSANDS OF PATRIOTS HAD GIVEN THEIR ALL. A *Sob-Squad* which could face an enemy's guns, but could not muster the courage to refuse the enemy's bribing prices made *cheaper* by the use of moneyed force . . . a *Sob-Squad* which would have been guilty of outright treason for selling out its country, except for the fact that it was perpetrating its crime in ignorance—but a *Sob-Squad*, nevertheless!

Chapter XX.

RETREAT.

It has been said that the public will not be warned. Because of the hopelessness of our nation's position, if this be true, the author has extended the narrative into the future, not to prophesy what will come to pass as far as details and methods are concerned, but to impress upon the reader what the inevitable end of our present trend must be. The story, from this point, takes place in the unwritten future, as these lines are being penned. It is hoped the warning will be clearly understood.

THE AUTHOR.

AND, NOW, the time had come for a showdown. What was left of the structure and forces of the Independent System in the realm which we Americans call *Business* must come to grips with its overwhelming enemy. But, as Bender sat at his desk, his task seemed well nigh impossible. For years, he had struggled against that which others had told him was inevitable; and he had almost come to believe it. In fact, he had already decided that it was useless, when a letter arrived to urge his flagging energies, and fan his waning courage into flame.

"*Dear Mr. Bender:*" the letter ran,

> Permit me to congratulate you upon the splendidly written articles which you have been writing for our farm publication, dealing with the developments of the Syndicate System, and its deplorable effect upon the farmers of the entire nation. At

first, I hesitated to publish them; but, with some misgivings, I decided to give them a try.

For a long time, we had no responses to show that they were really going home; but, of late, there is no mistaking the fact that THE FARMERS ARE WAKING UP TO THEIR DANGER!

The latest development comes in an announcement that there is going to be a great farmers' mass meeting this fall, as a feature of the State Fair. The Association's Secretary has written me, asking if I would try to secure a speaker who would place the situation squarely before the farmers of this state at that time.

I could think of no one but you. I don't know whether you are a public speaker, or not; but, if you will assume the obligation, I will see that you are slated as the speaker. The program will be broadcast, and if you will consent to do so, I shall see to it that you are placed in charge of the entire evening's event. Kindly reply at once.

Turning to Dorothy, he handed her the letter.

"Please write Mr. Lake that I shall be glad to do anything in my power to serve the Fair Association in this matter; and that I expect to be in the city very soon, and I will confer with him personally at that time."

In a very business like manner, the capable Dorothy made a few shorthand scrawls in her note book, and placed it by the typewriter. Then, referring to a calendar pad upon her desk, she reminded Bender, with her usual care for detail.

"Have you forgotten your appointment with the Civic Rountable at two o'clock?" '

Bender passed a hand across his forehead.

"Really, I had forgotten," he sighed. "Thank you for reminding me. I suppose I may as well be going; it's one-thirty, now, and I wanted to see Dar before the meeting."

Dorothy watched Bender closely, as he closed his desk, put on his coat, and reached for his hat. How tired and careworn he had become! She had wanted to tell him some things for a long time; and she decided there would never be a time in the future like the present.

Bender registered mild surprise, when he found the yellow haired woman blocking his way toward the door; and her first words caused the registration to intensify.

"Billy!"

It was the first time she had ever addressed him by his first name.

"Why, what is it, Dorothy?"

The girl seemed uncertain of her words, for a moment. Then, looking him straight in the eye, she began.

"I've been going to give you a scolding for two weeks, and never had the nerve to do it; but I'm going to do it, right now! When do you propose to see a doctor?"

"A *Doctor?*" he repeated. "Why should I see a *doctor?*"

It was not his secretary who spoke, now; it was a *friend*—and a *woman*, at that, who had taken him to task.

"Oh, don't be silly," she cried, impatiently. "*We* all see it; why, you are *all in!* You're ten years older than you were a year ago. Now," holding up an accusing finger, as he attempted to interrupt. "Don't try to deny

it. Glenn and Bobbie and I have talked about you many times, lately. Glenn says you need a vacation; I say you are worrying too much; but Bobbie says it's more than that. She says you are up against a hopeless fight, and that you will break before you give up! Which of us is right?"

Bender attempted a laugh which sounded flat and lifeless.

"Why, you are *all* wrong, girl," he denied. "I guess I am just a little fagged; but I haven't been getting my rest, of late, as I should. I'm sure that is all."

"What has been interfering with your rest, Billy?" she persisted stubbornly.

"Oh, I don't know . . . reading . . . and . . . "

"Now, Billy, tell me the truth!" she pleaded. "I know what it is! You are lying awake at night, and you can't sleep for thinking. You just toss and tumble and fret—count to yourself, listen to the clock tick—yet you can't get to sleep. You just think—think—think! I've been that way, and I know how it acts upon people."

Bender gave her another surprised look.

"*You—worry?*" he asked, incredulously.

"Indeed I have," she replied, her voice tremulous. "More than anyone but God knows. Billy, *I've* been up against a hopeless job, too, and no way out of my difficulty. Don't ask me about it! I wouldn't *mention* it, only to help *you!* Why don't you play fair with your friends, Billy, and let them help you? We all believe in you, and we want to help. But you won't let us. Why, man, you look like you'd been through a sickness or a war! You are nothing like the man you were two

years ago. You've just been slipping—slipping—slipping, all the time. You are as thin as a rail; and your eyes! Why, you look like a ghost! Now, I want you to come clean with me, Billy, and tell me exactly what it is. I'll not let you go before you do."

For a long time, Bender sat upon the proof table, studying Dorothy's anxious face. Something like the old enthusiasm slowly kindled in the blue eyes.

"Just what do *you* think it is?" he asked, finally.

It was Dorothy's turn to hesitate. She bit her lip to show her annoyance; then, as a flash of fire swept her face,

"I *know* what's the matter with you—now!" she cried, with an impatient fling of the yellow head. "You don't think anyone else can *fight* but *you*—you can't win *alone*, and you know it—you are too proud to share the load with your friends . . . and you are *not man enough to take a licking!*"

Instantly, the faint smile was wiped from his face, and a deeply hurt look sprang into his eyes.

"Why . . . Dorothy! I don't understand!"

"No! Of course, *you* don't understand! *You* never knew what it was to see anyone who is just like a brother to you fighting a losing fight, yet refusing to let you have a part in it when *you* wanted to fight, *too*. Here, I've sat in this office, day after day, doing everything I could—yet doing nothing that counted! You'll never know what you saved *me* from with your kindness, just when I was getting hard and bitter toward everybody. You've been a big brother to me, Billy Bender—but you won't give me a chance to return the deed. And it isn't fair!"

Hot tears were filling the pale blue eyes, as she rambled on; and Bender could only look his astonishment, speechless, stunned by the suddenness and unexpectedness of the attack.

"But it isn't only *me*. Glenn told me only last night how he had tried to ease the load; but you wouldn't. And *that* isn't fair. That man would go through *fire* for you. But you keep him hand-tied!

"And . . . Bobbie! That poor girl . . . Billy Bender, I'd be ashamed of myself, if I were you! Look how she has tried to help you—if ever there was a brave girl, it's Bobbie Baker. And, to see some simpleton like you making a chump of her—I should think you'd give *her* a square deal, anyhow."

"Dorothy! What are you saying?" barked Bender, hoarsely. "Me making a chump of *Bobbie!* Why, Dorothy, that's not true! God knows I'd do anything in the world for her—I think of her so much, and wish . . . "

Dorothy had become suddenly calm; and her voice was very tender as she finished what he would have said, had he gone much farther.

"You love her, don't you, Billy?"

Bender's gaze seemed to scorch where it struck.

"Yes! That's the hard part of it—I love her. And she would never care for me—that way. I *can't* talk to her—*too* much. If I did—I'd say too much—I'd let it slip out, and then it would be all over!"

Dorothy Herndon's turn for astonishment had come. Then, as the ridiculousness of it all struck with its full force, she tilted her head back, and went into a gale of laughter.

"Now you *are* getting funny! Say! Take tonight off, and invite Bobbie out for a ride in the moonlight. Just start in talking, and talk as long as you have anything to talk about. And, when you two get back, I'll tell the world it *will* be all over; and you'll be back on the job tomorrow with more fight in you than you've had since you hit town. *Then*, we'll talk *business*. Now, run along, Big Boy! It's time for the Roundtable."

Chapter XXI.

THE RALLY-CALL.

THE CIVIC Roundtable, as Bender had established it had come to be Pomoroy's principal public forum; and it bade fair to serve well its intended purpose in the present stress of conflicting circumstances and cross-purposes. Composed of representatives from every phase of civic life, its thirteen members now made up the chief council presiding over the material, moral and spiritual destinies of the community. Twice each month, one representative from each of eleven different lines of human endeavor attended a conference which held greater significance to Pomoroy than even the weekly meeting of the village council!

Churches, schools, agriculture, labor, women's clubs, fraternities, charities, municipal government, utilities, merchants and manufacturers—all were represented, with Darling occupying the secretary's chair, and Bender presiding over the whole. Here, the problems of a neighborhood were discussed and settled in the best interest of all; and any member, whose faction was subject to criticism or correction, was in duty bound to see that his constituents were brought into proper line of co-operation.

This afternoon, a session of particular importance had been announced and a unanimous attendance was already present when Bender appeared, five minutes

tardy. Immediately, the body "got down to business" with determination and despatch. Minutes were read, unfinished business disposed of, and new matters were now in order. A lull of silence came over the little body, as all waited. Everyone knew that Bender had something of vital importance to "spring" upon them—and each wondered where he would strike. That he meditated attack upon some quarter was evident from his manner; there was a snap in his action, a flash in his eye, and a set to his square jaw, that indicated a coming storm. Someone was in for a summons to appear upon the green carpet; and no one relished the prospect!

As Bender began speaking, his low, modulated voice seemed to drive every syllable home with the precision of a sledge hammer. First, he addressed Jason Baker, who represented the merchandising interests, and voiced his criticism of the business men. How they had persisted in a hardboiled course of business "competition" to the exclusion of moral and spiritual values in commerce. Turning upon a man by the name of Vander Veen, owner of the local cigar plant, he condemned in his old point-blank fashion, certain unfair methods on the part of the manufacturers.

"You manufacturers are playing off-side!" Bender accused, "You cry about the manner in which the syndicates are squeezing you into an operation which allows no profit to you. Yet, when some outside concern wants to sell you tires, and clothing, and items of staple groceries, to turn over to your employes at cost, you do it, in order that you may do something to keep your employees contented in the face of wage reduc-

tions which your syndicate customers have forced you to pass. In other words, you deplore the syndicate idea among *your* customers, *while you make syndicate customers of your employees.*"

Vander Veen did not take kindly to the criticism. Springing to his feet, he retorted hotly in the broken dialect of the Holland-born American.

"Mister Bender" let me tell you someding! Vat you say aboudt t'e pusiness of t'e pig combanies vat are tryin' to run t'e leetle feller oudt is all righdt; put, ven you begin tellin' people t'at t'ey can't shpent t'eir money vere t'ey please, you ain't got no righdt! If ve kin puy someding for our men vat safes t'm money, ve do it; an' like Americans ve haff t'e righdt to shpent our money vere ve vant to—an' your pusiness it ain't!"

Bender's face had become strangely hard; and his tone had in it a decided chill as he replied.

"Listen, Van, I've been wanting to tell *you* something for a long time; and that is just this:

"For the past two years you have been bringing more and more of your people—families of Holland descent—into Pomoroy. We are glad you have. They are fine people—there are no finer. They are honest to a fault, if that is possible; they are industrious, thrifty and clean—physically and morally. The same may be said of a lot of other foreign races which come to this country in quest of a prosperity, happiness and freedom which they could not find in Europe and we are glad that they are here. But . . . "

The reversal was brought out with cutting finality and the pause was suggestive of a coming broadside, which Bender delivered with merciless directness.

"I have often noticed that you foreign-born Americans are always ready to defend your selfishness and greed in the name of *your rights.* You aren't the first Hollander in this town who has told me that *he has a right to spend his money where he pleases.* Now I want to ask you something. *Can you prove that you have been as ready to defend your rights as you have been to hide behind them?*"

The gentleman from Amsterdam squirmed uneasily. "Vat you mean?" he asked.

"I mean just this," retorted Bender, "That you people come over here from Europe. The first thing you learn is that you have certain *rights and liberties*—but, that *you are responsible for the protection of those rights and liberties* seems the last lesson in Americanism for you! And this is not for Holland people, alone—it applies to all of you *adopted Americans!* I say that when you come over here to live in this country because it is *different* than your native land, but refuse *to become different,* like ourselves, you are biting the hand that feeds you. You *make* money differently here than over there and you must learn to *save* it by different calculations. You enjoy, today the things that *my* forefathers died to win and hold for *me*—and I am willing to share them with you. But I'm not going to stand for you telling me that I have nothing to say, when you persist in abusing the liberties which you have in America. Why, Van, *my ancestors were making* this country what it is today, while *yours were wearing wooden shoes in Holland.* And, so help me God, I'm just man enough to tell you to your face that *when I see you making ducks and drakes of the liberties that*

my fathers died to give me, I'm going to give you hell for it! And you'll listen, too, or back you'll go to the place you came from, if I have to drag you back by the hairs of your head! You make sure of your *responsibilities first. Until that time don't be so quick to talk about your rights—for you are entitled to none.* And that goes for every person in the room; and every living soul under the Stars-and-Strips! What do *you say?*"

* * *

The Roundtable session had dismissed; and from it had gone out, for the first time in the history of Pomoroy, *a leader* backed by a dozen lieutenants, each of whom had pledged the loyalty of his division to a common cause of *Material Democracy.* That the movement had been launched in the last nick of time was proven by the developments of the next twenty-four hours, for the following morning, it was announced that another merger—a local one—had transpired. A banking syndicate in Capitol City, headed by Jasper Haine, had bought four banks in King County—and one of these was the Pomoroy State Bank.

Too late, the game of the enemy was apparent. The organized forces of Big Business, who had followed a given policy in industry and found it good, had set out to apply it to agriculture. Years of developments—mergers, combines and alliances between and among large corporations—had demonstrated the fact that *when the syndicate could make a certain product themselves for less than they must pay the manufacturers—the syndicate proceeded to make their own products.* If this involved certain private brands, protected by

the manufacturer, then *the syndicate had bought out the manufacturer.*

Consequently, the same syndicate system which had made industry more *efficient* through *centralization* now saw a vast field in agriculture—ripe for the harvest. Why should not the syndicate "improve" farming efficiency and cut costs? It would be a task of utmost simplicity, compared to the difficulty of those things already accomplished. Yes, the syndicate must go into the business of farming.

Accordingly, a review had been made; and untold numbers of mortgages, more than twenty-five percent of which had already become delinquent, were found to be in the possession of banks all over the country—and among these, five banks in King County. So easy, then. All that remained for Haine to do was to purchase certain banks and gain possession of these mortgages. Then, when these came due and the farmers would be unable to satisfy them in full ("Farm Relief" had not yet been solved)—well! Haine would simply foreclose and the land would be his at the price of the mortgage paper.

Within a week King County had become a seething caldron of commercial rebellion. Farmers met, and discussed the situation. Manufacturers conferred with one another; for *they* remembered certain notes that lay in the local bank which they *might* have to meet in full upon the due-date, and that would spell confiscation and ruin to them. Labor, being told of the straits in which their employers had been placed, held mass meetings. Husbands and wives debated the facts and the fire of indignation spread into the women's clubs—

and even into the Ladies' Aid Society. Children in the schools began asking certain embarrassing questions upon the subject of economics; and the high school debating team chose a new subject: "*Resolved, That Syndicated Enterprise Is Injurious to the Public Welfare.*" Preachers in the pulpits injected practical economy into their sermons on the text of the Golden Rule and the Good Samaritan. Merchants took an oath of allegiance to all their kind, in every purchase order. Even the village council cancelled all orders upon such firms as were known to be of syndicate connections. A people who had refused to be warned against false economy, when they could have waived such immediate savings without hardship, now refused as emphatically to be baited when immediate economy was essential. Mrs. Blindergast thought to take advantage of some ridiculously low "specials," but when she learned from Mrs. French the following day that Amanda Billings had said that Sadie Blindergast must be in a serious state of finances, as Sadie had been seen coming out of a chain store with a market basket on her arm, Sadie sought the services of another grocer!

Madam Gossip was now working overtime in a constructive way. Rumors of the King County rebellion against the syndicates spread like a prairie fire; and, with it, a public revulsion against the system. Syndicate stores were empty and their managers idle. It was reported that the Dominion & Gulf would close seven stores in King County the last of the month. Another chain discontinued its warehouse in Capitol City and "pulled" more than half its stores in that part of the State.

Letters began coming into Bender's office asking him how the trick had been done. Farmers' associations congratulated him upon his stand and urged him to remain firm in his position. The war was now on in earnest with some hope of a last-minute victory, yet!

About a month later Milton Harris paid Bender a visit. He had just received notice that his mortgage, which would fall due that fall must be met in full, or foreclosure proceedings would be started.

"I just can't meet it, Bender!" he all but sobbed, "the doctors have found what they believe will be a cure for Betty; and, if it works, she will walk again and be a normal child. That is going to cost me more than two thousand dollars. I am raising the money as best I can before they close me out—*she's* going to have a decent start, anyhow, if it is possible. It they don't cure her—well, I guess I'm sunk, as it is! But I *do* wish—God, how I hope Betty will get well! It's going to be tough for Mrs. Harris, this starting all over again at our place in life, but I would do it—I'd face *anything*, if only Betty could be like other children! And the doctor is almost sure that she will be. Bill, I'm spending my last dollar for her, because she's all that we have in the world!"

Bender had been paying only partial attention to Milton's words. For, while Harris had been speaking, Dorothy had been strangely interested in what he said. Now, she was approaching Haris, wild-eyed, lips parted, as if in a trance.

"Did you say that Betty would be—well, again?" She asked, incredulously, "is she to *walk* and *play*, like other children?"

Harris seemed surprised at her interest in the matter. He nodded while he looked at her oddly. But Dorothy said nothing more. She merely sighed, returned to her desk and dropped her head upon her arms with a sound that was almost a sob.

At this precise moment, the station agent entered and handed Bender a telegram. Ripping open the yellow envelope, he scanned the lines upon the sheet enclosed:

CONGRATULATIONS OLD MAN LUCK IS WITH YOU HAINE SENT TO HOSPITAL THIS MORNING DOCTORS HOLD NO HOPE.

CON

Bender handed the message to Harris who read it at a glance. A hard, bitter smile writhed his lips into a snarl as he looked up into Bender's face.

"That's the first good news I've had today," he hissed, "that man deserves hell if ever a man did—damn him! Bender, it's been many years since I've said a prayer, but I'm going to pray for the worst tonight! Of course it makes no difference to me now whether he lives or rots, but it would give me a lot of satisfaction to know that he never put his dirty fingers on *my* property!"

Bender had likewise undergone a change. His face had gone ashen and a gleam of utter hatred lay bare in his hard gaze. Placing his hand upon Harris' shoulder he shook his head as he spoke:

"Milt, Jasper Haine is a born demon—a heartless machine of a man to whom nothing matters but filthy gold! With millions to his credit, he must still wreck the hopes of others, rob them of that which is theirs, and call it *Good Business! You* think you have cause

to hate him and his devilish methods of business—why, man, you ought to know *my* story! I've harbored hatred for that man all my life—and sworn that some day I'd even the score. But it seems that fate must beat me to it. How I hate that man none but God will ever know. As long as *he* lives to hoard his gold, I shall never know a happy day. But there'll be a lot of people praying for the worst, when they read this in the papers, Milt. None of us will ever know the hell he and his kind have made for this country."

While Bender had been delivering himself upon the subject of Jasper Haine, Dorothy's interest in the conversation had revived. Slipping to Bender's side, while she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, she looked over his arm and read the telegram. Then with a long, quivering sob she ran one long-fingered hand through her yellow hair and swooned into a heap upon the floor.

"She's fainted!" cried Bender, picking her up and placing her upon the table. "Quick, Milt! Bring water!"

Chapter XXII.

SUSPENSE.

A HECTIC summer had all but merged into autumn; and, with the first tang of frost in the air, the sun seemed to be sinking upon the last hopes of a countryside. Pomoroy had made her last stand; and even the most optimistic was forced to admit that she waited only the repossession movement which would usher in the new era of suppression of the masses at the hand of a moneyed aristocracy. The iron hand of Big Business had closed upon the soil, itself, the very source of all sustenance of life, Efficiency had served her master well in deceiving a self-governing race and the victims had but the prospect of economic servitude to show for all that they had "saved."

There was but one grim hope—Bender! Still unbeaten, indomitable, he persisted in his occupation of center-stage in this great drama. For weeks he had been carrying on his campaign against the inevitable, marshalling his forces and extending his machinery into the fartherest corners of the State. It was all being done quietly; not a word of him was being published in the papers—but Pomoroy knew! Every day the word was passed down the street that Bender was planning one last grandstand piece of strategy which *might* work.

Nor had he been working in vain. Two bills had already been prepared to introduce in the next session

of the Legislature. A group of political figures had been induced to join in his support; and a candidate of Bender's choosing had entered the race for the office of governor of the State. His platform had been "*INDEPENDENT ENTERPRISE;*" and the hottest primary campaign ever waged in the history of the State had resulted in Bender's candidate receiving the popular choice of the dominating party. Haine's man, the incumbent who had sought re-nomination, had been literally "snowed under" and there was now no question about Bender's man winning the election in November. *That* was sure.

It had all been very nicely planned. For, while Bender's political machine had been fighting for votes, it had been scattering propaganda from one end of the State to the other. Now, an entire commonwealth was fully aroused to the seriousness of the situation, and those who were most intimately in touch with the inner operations of Bender's program were still wondering whether he had really sought to elect his man, or whether he had taken advantage of an opportunity to reach the public's ear. In any event he had succeeded in doing both and now he was preparing for the autumn drive. The State Fair Association was depending upon Bender to put it over and he was leaving no stone unturned to insure the success of his experiment.

Meanwhile, his little corps of Pomoroy lieutenants were daily "on the job." Glen Darling, energetic as ever and just a shade more serious, seemed to know everything that was going on. Bobbie upon the one side and Dorothy on the other, had rendered him valuable support. While he had, in his capacity with the

Chamber of Commerce, succeeeded in suppressing certain outlaw elements in business which might otherwise have upset the plans which Bender had so carefully worked out, he had, at the same time, seen to it that every instruction of Bender's was filled to the letter. The Pilot had never missed an issue—indeed, had never failed to come out promptly on time. Altogether, Glenn Darling would have been having a wonderful time of it all, despite the toil and worry, largely because of the fact that he and Dorothy had been thrown almost constantly together, had it not been for one obstruction. Dorothy insisted upon keeping all things between them confined strictly to matters of *Business*. Glenn Darling, who had once made a hobby of studying *Business*, had made up his mind that he had studied it to his heart's content! There was a private matter which he was becoming impatient to settle, if only Dorothy could be made to sit still long enough to listen!

Dorothy had him guessing and he admitted it. First, there was her strange undue interest in Haine. Bender had told him about her unaccountable reaction when she had read the telegram that day; and he had often since noticed the quickening of her eyes when the monopolist's name was mentioned. Then there had been, also, her inexplicable concern for little Betty Harris during all those weeks when she had been under the doctor's care. In fact, she was now more than ever so, since the crisis was coming near, when it would be found for certain whether the child would be cured or proven a hopeless case. Certainly Dorothy was a strange girl, and while Darling had already "given her up" as a

puzzle, he was still a long way from doing so as a—ah—*prospect*, so to speak!

But Bender had seen to it that Darling was given plenty to keep his mind from brooding over his complicated affairs of the heart; and, now, something else had come up which furnished a fresh wrinkle in the badly mussed complexion of things. Blondy McNeal, who had not been seen in King County after that night of the fight, had returned. Bobbie had told him so and her report had been most disquieting. McNeal was in hiding in Dirty Hollow and he had been making threats of what he proposed to do to Bender if and when he saw him again.

"Someone in Dirty Hollow told me about it, in confidence," she had said. "Of course we can't have him arrested, but we must be careful. Any time that Billy is in town we must see that he is kept under guard, without him being aware of it. How are we going to go about it? Blondy is a terrible man and he will stop at nothing."

Darling "went about it" with his customary thoroughness, with the result that not a train arrived in Pomoroy, when Bender was absent, which was not met by someone. When he *was* in town someone stood secret watch over him—not an easy thing at all times—considering Bender's powers of locomotion.

Finally, at a suggestion from Jason Baker, a day-and-night watch was established in hiding at Dirty Hollow, working in three shifts, to furnish added protection.

"We cain't take any chances on Bender," was Jason's opinion on the matter. "You're doin' two men's work

here an' I'll give y'u credit, but y'u cain't take *his* place. He's head over heels in the biggest job one man ever had in his here state, an' he's life er death to this town right now—an' a lotta others! Jist keep an eye on the Holler. Blondy's thar! When he comes out of his den the boys kin phone word he's out."

Two more weeks and Bender's state-wide campaign was over. Everything was in readiness for the big night, except his speech. Taking one last review of the field, he returned to Pomoroy to closet himself with his thoughts and material, and work out a message which was to make history. That it would be an affair of record was certain. His machinery had been working with clocklike precision and an entire State was standing at attention, like minutemen, awaiting the shot that should be the signal for the last volley from the defense which should mean victory or defeat.

A new fear had come to grip the hearts of his handful of intimate innercircle of friends. *Bender was slipping again.* The village physician, whom Darling had solicited to watch Bender's physical well being, had studied his unconscious patient at every opportunity offered by circumstances and his report was far from reassuring.

"He's liable to cave in any time." was Pitman's verdict. "He's as poor as a skeleton and his nerves are getting jumpy. His eyes are like saucers. If I could only work it some way, I'd have him put to bed for a week; but Lord! you might as well tell a caged lion to lie down in the corner and go to sleep. He's going like a locomotive running wild—running on his nerves alone. When he cracks he'll go all to pieces—and all

the king's horses and all the king's men will never put him together again. All we can do is hold him in as much as we can 'til after the Big Night. Then, if there's anything left of him, we'll pack him off to the sanitarium for a month. Take as much off his shoulders as you can."

From that moment a mighty fear turned Darling cold. What if Bender *should* "blow up?" What about the *fight?* With a strange tightening of the lips Glenn Darling began jotting notes upon little cards while he read column after column of the vast volume of Bender's past writings upon the various phases of the syndicate evil. Page after page he wrote, sitting up into the wee hours of the morning—toiling, napping, waking with a start and back to toil again.

The week of the State Fair opened at last. All the artistry of nature was at work with its autumn colors, splashing tree, shrub and hillside with a riot of pigment. Wednesday! Tomorrow night was the night—and Bender had come out of his seclusion—pale, emaciated, but with a spring in his step that suggested still untapped reserves of strength. All morning he spent driving through the country. Farmer after farmer engaged him in conversation, flattering him upon the results of his work and assuring him that he would be "on the job" tomorrow night at Capitol City. Pomoroy would be there and King County would turn out almost to a man. As Bender shook their horny hands and felt the warmth of their regard for him, the unspoken appreciation of his courage and his labor on their behalf, he thought of other days and smiled a bit sadly upon recollecting how he had said that there

was no such thing as *real friendship*, any more. How common dangers drove men together into a bond of fraternity which times of peace and plenty could never breed!

Upon his return to town he drove his car into the garage and headed for the Baker home afoot. Bobbie had asked him to dinner and he heaved a sigh of weary satisfaction. Whose company but *hers* could put him in trim for tomorrow night's ordeal? There would be *this* night of silence, yet—silence that still clamped his lips against the words which he had waited months and years to say. But after tomorrow, win or lose, he would keep them back no longer. Just for tonight he must refuse them utterance.

Darkness came, and lights began to gleam from Pomoroy's windows. Bobbie and Bender had the living room to themselves. Jason, faced with the prospect of a late night of it tomorrow, had already retired. The hands of the clock were pointed at the hour of ten when the telephone rang. Bobbie was engaged for the moment in placing wood upon the fire in the fireplace, so Bender answered the summons.

"This is Mrs. Harris. Milton is in town—have you seen him?" came a hysterical voice over the wire.

"No, I haven't. Did you want to reach him?"

"Yes, for God's sake, find him! Betty is terribly sick. Tell him to find the doctor and hurry home."

"I'll be right over. I may not find Milt, but I'll find Doc."

Snatching his coat and hat and hurriedly explaining the cause of his haste, Bender started for the door,

deaf to Bobbie's entreaties that he must not do such a thing.

"Get the keys to your father's car!" he cried, "Mine is uptown and I can't wait to get it! Hurry, girl, don't stop to talk!"

The key in his possession, Bender ran to the garage; and, before Jason had succeeded in reaching the first floor, barefoot and shirtless, the Baker car had roared out of the yard. Finding the doctor just entering the door of his home, Bender bundled him into the machine and within ten minutes the physician was bending over the child's writhing form.

"Convulsions!" groaned Doctor Pitman. "The medicine has gone against her!"

The distraught mother seized his arm in a frenzy of fear.

"She will live? Don't tell me that she is going to . . . . !" she whispered.

Bender, pale, hands clenched at his side, stood looking down into the distorted little face.

"My God, Doc! Isn't there something you can do?" he cried hoarsely. "We can't let her go this way and do nothing!"

Pitman stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"If we could but get her to the hospital in Capitol. We might have one chance in a hundred. But . . . "

Already Bender had interrupted him. Turning to the mother he began giving orders:

"Get her ready, quick! Just wrap her in blankets. And, Doc, you're driving through with *me* right now! I'll check up on oil and gas and be ready in three minutes. Bring her out as soon as she is ready."

Pitman followed Bender to the door.

"Bender. You're crazy. *You* can't do this! You'll . . . "

"Shut up!" roared Bender over his shoulder. "Do as I say, man, or . . . I'll murder you!"

Five minutes later, the big machine was roaring toward Pomoroy at sixty miles an hour.

"Stop at the house, Bill!" said the doctor, as they neared the outskirts of the town, "I must get my other satchel in case she takes worse on the road."

* * *

A slinking figure had hovered in the shadows opposite the doctor's house. A motorcar pulled up and came to a sliding halt as the doctor stood sorting his keys in search of the proper means of entrance to his domicile.

"Doc! Hurry! Betty's very sick! Come with me. I'll bring you back—don't wait to get your car!"

Blondy McNeal started at the sound of the familiar voice. A wolf-like snarl bared his teeth as he crept along the hedge of shrubbery to gain a better view of the possessor of that voice. What luck! He peered intently into the darkness beneath the trees where the motor still hummed softly trying in vain to make out the position of the driver. As the gears ground and the car swept out into the street again McNeal raised a rifle to his shoulder, took aim, then dropped the muzzle again.

"Cain't make sure. No use takin' chances. He said he'd be back; an' I kin wait."

Stealthily he made his way to the next corner where an interesction of streets lay bright as day in the glare of a light.

"He'll hafta come this way back. An' here I kin see," he muttered to himself and slipped into a lilac thicket where he could watch and wait unseen.

Chapter XXIII.

FROM AMBUSH.

BEFORE the Baker car had roared out of hearing Bobbie was at the telephone.

"Hello, Glenn!" She finally cried, "something terrible has happened. Betty is very sick. Mrs. Harris called here seeking her husband. She told Billy about it and he has already left in father's car. He is after the doctor. You can catch him at the doctor's house if you hurry. You must stop him. He can't stand the excitement. Hurry!"

"I get you," came back the familiar voice, followed by a click of the receiver. While Bobbie waited, helpless to do anything more she paced the room, clasping and unclasping her hands in a fever of excitement and fear. Meanwhile Jason struggled into his shoes and shirt and stood ready he knew not for what. Ten minutes later a machine rumbled up to the gate and came to a stop with a scream of brakes. In an instant Bobbie was on the front porch peering into the gloom.

"Billy," she called softly, "is that you?"

"No!" growled a voice that she identified as Darling's, "I missed him. Just saw the car leaving Doc's house, as I ran around the corner. I called to him, but it did no good. So I grabbed off his machine and hurried down here. We'll block him yet, little girl. Don't worry about that."

By this time they had entered the house. Darling picked up the phone, placed a call and waited.

"Hello! Mrs. Harris. Is Bender there yet? . . . Gone! . . . Where? . . . Capitol City? At this time of night? . . . Oh!"

It was a much shaken Darling who faced the trembling girl.

"Hell!" he groaned, "Bender's smashing up the whole works! The big fool is driving through to Capitol with Doc and the kid . . . Said she would die if they didn't get her to the hospital at once! *He* can't stand that drive, Bob. What can we do?"

"Don't ask me. Don't stop to talk!" cried Bobbie. *Think* of something . . . *do* something!"

Darling seized her two shoulders with the sudden impulse of an idea.

"I have it! We'll stop him at Main street crossing. He'll come that way to hit the cement pavement west of town. Hurry!"

He had scarcely finished his statement before he had half led, half dragged the girl with him out of the door and into the machine. One minute later Bender's coupe slid to a halt at the cross roads where the Baker car must be due now if not already gone. A pair of headlights gleamed down the road.

"That's him," was Darling's instant conclusion. "We'll pull around facing the same way as he goes and stop him or race him, whatever may be necessary."

Before he had succeeded in this, the unexpected happened. The coming machine had turned off to the left at the next corner east. It would not pass them at all.

"Now, what do you make of that?" questioned Darling, "must be someone else."

Bobbie strained her ears to listen to the roar of the other machine, more than a block away.

"No! That's daddy's car!" she cried. "Ill bet they had to stop at Doc's house. Quick, turn around. We'll catch them yet!"

It required some little time to swing the coupe about. The pursuers were still a half a block from the point of interception when the big sedan swung around the corner into Main street.

"Step on it," pleaded Bobbie. "Head them off—they are going . . . Oh, God have mercy!"

The interruption had occurred when, just as the Baker car had passed the corner, headed directly toward them, there had been a flash of fire from the shadows beneath the trees near the sidewalk and the crack of a rifle. The big machine swerved, almost into the ditch, righted itself, let out a roar as of some beast in a rage, gathered momentum in one great leap, and shot past them down the road.

"What was that?" screamed Bobbie, clutching Darling's arm in terror, "a gun?"

"McNeal, I'll bet my life," ground out Darling, between his teeth, "shot from the dark . . . cowardly hound!"

Again, Darling swung the coupe awkwardly about, with much backing and heading and shifting of gears. At last, when they were under way, again, the Baker car had turned the next corner, and disappeared.

"Heading for the paved highway," muttered Darling. "If this car has the speed, we'll overtake them—if not,

we'll follow, anyhow. Just be brave, my girl—we're in for a race of it—and I must give my whole attention to the road."

Out of the village, and into the country, swept the low-swung coupe, graceful as a swallow, swift as an arrow upon its course. Two miles, and they reached the main highway, into which they turned; then, south toward Capitol City. Far ahead, a splotch of light could be seen upon the pavement—from the headlights of the fleeing car. Occasionally, its muffled roar came to their ears upon the breeze. Bender certainly was "stepping on the gas," Darling told the girl at his side.

Stanwood and Cascade were passed, and left behind, without the least slackening of speed—then Tamarack, and Redmond. Try as he might, Darling could not gain a rod upon the fugitive car. For every added mile per hour he could coax from the coupe, the big sedan had another mile to match it! Bobbie, watching the speedometer, saw the dial creep up—up—up—sixty—sixty-five—sixty-eight— seventy-two — seventy-five — still, and always, the patch of white light, and the little ball of red kept its measured distance ahead.

Finally, just beyond Parker's Corners, the pursuers knew that they were gaining. Darling had noticed something about the patch of white, ahead. It had taken another notion to waver back and forth across the road. There was something wrong, up ahead. That drunken weave, from left to right and back again, was not right. Once, Bobbie screamed, when it seemed that the headlong race must end—Bender had almost ditched himself, righting his course only by a hair-

breadth. Yet, not a word from the girl. She was "game," if ever one was, Darling reflected.

Dillon, a tiny village, sound asleep, slipped past them in the moonlight; then, the road took a series of sweeping curves, around which the big sedan swept with no slackening of speed; and, always, just behind, the quiet little coupe held its ground. Then—the outskirts of Capitol City. The red sky ahead had, for several minutes, testified that they were near the end of the race. Down Central Avenue Boulevard forged the big machine, its lines now clearly defined in the glare of the white way. And always, right behind, the low-slung coupe, purring its determination to hold its own. At Hamilton Drive, an officer hailed them; but his yell fell upon deaf ears. Up Capitol Hill, the leading machine turned into Wilcox Drive, and headed across the city, with the smaller machine right behind. Then, with one last spurt of speed, followed by a scream of brakes and a sliding of tires, both cars came to a halt at the doors of the Emergency Annex of the hospital!

Attendants, attracted by the horn of the Baker car, rushed out, garbed in white, trundling a stretcher upon wheels; a little, white bundle was placed thereon, and the entire party disappeared, again, within the great building.

Before the coupe had come to a full stop, Bobbie had jumped to the curb, and began running toward the next machine. Darling, who required time to set brakes, and turn off the motor, was necessarily delayed in his movements. When he finally arrived at the side of the Baker sedan, it was to find Bobbie in the front seat, with Bender's red head upon her shoulder.

"Oh, Glenn!" she moaned, "he's hurt! There's blood on his vest and he has fainted; Quick! Call for help!"

* * *

Early morning! Two patients lay unconscious in private rooms in St. Luke's; one of them again assured of a cure from a hopeless state of invalidism, and a quick recovery—the other, very doubtful. As doctor Pitman and the hospital physician stood looking down upon the long, emaciated form that lay so still, except for its heavy breathing, both shook their heads.

"Shot clean through the chest!" Pitman was telling Darling, and the white-faced girl who sat upon the bed, stroking one lifeless hand as it lay upon the sheets, "It's high up in the shoulder, though; and he would have a chance to recover, but for one thing. He is so run down, I fear he'll never come back—even to consciousness. You don't know of any relatives or friends who might wish to be informed, do you?"

Darling nodded negatively.

"None save we who already know."

Bobbie's head was bowed; and tears coursed down her cheeks. Darling swallowed a great lump that rose in his throat.

"Are you doing everything, possible, Doctor?"

The house-doctor nodded.

"Everything."

Darling then bent over Bobbie's shoulder, and whispered into her ear.

"Buck up, little one! We've both got big jobs on our hands. It's going to be up to me to hold the fort, tonight, and, when the time comes, I'll be there. But it's up to *you* to pull *him* through! Don't let him

awaken once and not find you within reaching distance. Keep him fighting every waking moment, kid. He loves you, girl; and, when strong men love—love works wonders! That's *your* work; and I have *mine!* Goodbye, kid! When I see you, again, it will be all over—we we shall have won, or lost. Be brave—watch *him*—and, if you have time and thought—pray for *me*—I'll need it tonight, and no mistake."

With that, he was gone. Good boy, Glenn! A modern patriot, only a drummer-boy, perhaps; but ready upon the instant to seize the colors from the hand of a fallen leader, and carry on. Until red dawn, a grim young man paced the floor of a room in a big hotel, at grips with an unfriendly fate, and fighting off the attacks of the little fear-demons that rioted within him.

"You've got to put it over," he whispered to himself, "all you're life you've been a grand-stander—a bluffer and a kidder! Now, you're caught with the goods. If you flunk it, now, you're sunk! It's up to you to *put* up or *shut* up—I'm calling you're bluff right now!"

Chapter XXIV.

THE MAN OF THE HOUR

THE Municipal Auditorium was packed to the doors. Thousands of people—predominantly farmers—had gathered for the great event—a vast sea of humanity that had surged to its usher-appointed place, there to lie in uneasy ripples of suspense, awaiting its moment of expression. There was to be seen, in the grim, determined faces of these hard-handed sons of the soil, the primal spirit of the Anglo-Saxon, to whom liberty is more precious than life itself—a revival of the spirit of '76, which had set itself anew to make its voice heard in its own cause. The voice which had spoken six times from the mouths of cannon and musketry, and before whose edicts tyranny had never failed to tremble! There it lay, again, naked as ever in a time of crisis—stark, indominitable, dynamic American Patriotism, ready and waiting to be stirred by the soul-storming words of another Patrick Henry!

Upon the huge platform, temporarily erected for the occasion, its front banked high with flowers, was seated another body—five hundred honored guests, delegates representing every walk of American life. Employers and Labor; Manufacturer, Merchant, Jobber and Salesman, Women's Clubs, Churches and Fraternities, Civic Leaders, Politicians and Charities—even the Educational Circle—all were there to pledge the support of

their respective classes to the Modern American Cause. Then, when it seemed that the program must begin, the Firemen's and Policemen's Band struck up a patriotic air; and, down the aisle, in perfect step and organized formation, marched the Boy Scouts, followed by the Campfire Girls, to take their places in the hundred or more chairs still reserved for them at center-stage. High over the heads of the leaders had been borne this legend: *WE'RE AMERICANS, TOO! SAVE LIBERTY FOR US!*

A ripple of applause broke out, and swelled into a roar of hands. In the midst of the uproar, the band swung into the strains of AMERICA; and every man, woman and child stood to sing.

As the last bar of the final stanza was being played, six thousand throats calling out, "*Great God, Our King!*" a slender, dapper figure detached itself from the staged delegation, and took his place before them all. For several moments, while quiet was being restored, his black eyes, burning like live coals, roved over the throng before him. Out over the main floor, row upon row, he gazed, here and there, as if searching for someone.

Someone whistled. Tom Crandall's voice was heard.

"Atta boy, Dar!"

Another called:

"The whole town's backin' y'u!"

Then, up rose a division of the audience to its feet, and broke out in cheers. It was Pomoroy—all in one little mob—voicing its confidence and pride in him. Yes, *they* knew what he was up against—*he* whom she

had never taken seriously, before. Little wonder, now that he thought of it!

He bowed in their direction, but still continued to look for someone whom he couldn't find—then, he spied her. There she was, right in the front row of the balcony, her yellow hair standing out like a plume against a colorful background—and she was leaning toward him—she saw him looking at her. Darling started and flushed. She was making a sign for him to see—yes! She had thrown him a kiss! His head went up and back, with a defiant movement. He was ready!

As his clear, piercing voice cut into the silence, the audience listened with rapt attention. What had happened? *This* was not *Bender!* Where was *Bender?* They waited for him to be introduced. But as the stranger continued to speak, it became evident that this was *IT!* Just when they were preparing to be disappointed, they discovered that they were already holding their breath; and that the speaker was now launching himself into a fiery flow of words that held them spellbound. Starting at the earliest dawn of civilization following the Edenic Fall of Man, when humanity had traded its Individual Paradise for Human Government, he traced the history of mankind in a moving picture of words. The rise and fall of Cain, the Tower of Babel with matchless phrases were described.

"Man, in rebellion against an Infinite God, had sought his own way toward Heaven—seeking like Lucifer, in pride, to be like the Most High. And the end thereof was confusion. Confusion of tongues in which no man understood his fellows."

Followed, the passing of the Pharoahs of Egypt; the erection and downfall of Babylon; the supremacy and decay of Rome—an all but endless parade of Empires, each of whom was doomed to oblivion by its own greed.

"Wherever men have been ruled by kings and despots, they have left a trail behind them—a trail of ruin, of lust, of *blood*," he summarized. "Cruelty and monstrous greed have marked the path of every Ceasar in the pages of history. Selfishness—iron-fisted gluttony for power, wealth and satisfaction of the sensual, has been the earmark of Imperialism and Monarchy, wherever it has ever shown its head. Fire, sword, pestilence, famine, rapine and death have each laid waste as lords have ordered—and the masses have ever been the victims."

Then, with deft touches of feeling, in which his every heart-throb asserted itself, he pictured the coming of the Pilgrims to Plymouth Rock; the founding of the colonies; the hardships of frontier days. Out of a world-old state of oppression, the makings of a new era had been gathered; and a new nation formed—out of a people who were the product of generations of oppression, refined in the crucible of human trial, and fit to rule themselves.

"With the first rattle of musketry at Lexington and Concord, new depths of human power were sounded—a new dynamic found. It was not a struggle between two despots, playing a game with human pawns. It was the death-duel between a despot and those whom he would rule. Grim, relentless *Efficiency*, which had never failed to conquer, had met her mortal foe—*Brotherhood, Loyalty, Love of Fellowmen.* The *Efficiency*

of the Caesars and the Pharoahs—the *Efficiency* which had dared the Almighty at Babel—*Efficiency engaged in combat with The Spirit of '76 and failed.* Ignominious in her defeat, she fled back to her European stronghold, with her routed whelps howling at her heels. Five times since, has the Spirit of America come to grips with Imperialism—an Imperialism ever more *Efficient* than her enemy, better trained in the arts of human misery —and, in every war which Independence has ever fought against her ancient foe, she has won. *Not* by reason of her greater skill; *not* by her superior organization; not even by virtue of her greater powers. *But ever by reason of that inbred instinct which is ours—love of Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness!*"

A moment, he paused; then, just when applause would have broken out, Darling leaned far out over the brink of the platform, and hurled a challenge at his audience.

"Millions of America's truest sons have died gloriously for these; but never yet has a true Son of Liberty fallen under the folds of Old Glory—a puppet of a despot! We yet have millions more to die, if need be, for their fellows; *but not one drop of American blood shall be shed in defense of kings and potentates, so help us God!*"

Then and there, not to be denied, pandemonium broke loose. Wave upon wave, like breakers upon the beach, the surge of human emotions billowed up to break at his feet. While he waited for quiet to return, Darling mopped his dripping face, while his breath came in gasping sobs. His heart was at bursting point; his temples throbbed; there was a pounding in his ears

that was not a part of the applause. Gathering himself for the big attack, he fairly flung himself into the fray.

"But Imperialism is not yet dead!" he cried. "Europe, her age-old stamping ground, lies in devastation, today, because of what she has done in our own generation. Not alone is this a ruin of homes, of factories and of fields—there is a greater wealth laid waste. Men of neighboring states, created in the image of God, and heirs to Love by Christ, His Son, bare their fangs like wolves, and watch their opportunity to give more utterance to human hate. Imperialism has never been known to establish bonds of love. Hatred is her Golden Rule —unbridled lust her Paradise. And, now, after fifteen decades of failure to take our coasts by storm, she has come peaceably within our borders, with deceiving gifts and promises of better things for us. Imperialism, whose life has been spent in laying waste the peasant's domicile, and wrecking vengeance upon the weak, dares to speak of better things to those whom she has betrayed since civilization first began. And, we —*WE AMERICANS*—have listened to her honeyed words, and tasted of her sweet deceptions. *And, behold, we have called them GOOD!*"

With biting invective and stinging satire, the newborn orator sketched the history of Business in America. Its intrigues, its secret treaties, its ruthlessness and its miseries. The Trend-of-the-Times was penciled in livid speech which fairly burned the ears, and seared the heart. Time after time, they would have applauded; but he gave no opening. Paragraph after paragraph, point after point, he forged on, sparing none and giving no quarter. Names and personalities were given frequent

indulgence—even localized. Great corporations were stripped without mercy; intimate dealings and specific treansactions bared; and, in all, a story told whose gruesome details were designed to move the hardest heart to repugnance. The conquest of Industry; the suppression of Merchandising; the servitude of Labor which yet must come! and, last but greatest of all, the *rapine of the land*—all these, he stressed. Literally volumes of facts and figures were given to prove the actual efforts already successfully made to reduce the masses to economic slavery. Then, with lightning-like rapidity, he drove the final points home—points upon which he pictured American Liberty impaled.

Turning to the children at his back, he bade his audience to look upon them—the future Americans—our citizenry of tomorrow.

"See, here, the ones whose birth is yours to answer for before the Judgment Bar of God! You, whose fathers toiled, and suffered, in order that *you* might be free—*economically free!* You, who have enjoyed the Independence and Freedom which is the guarantee of this great land—a guarantee which has been sanctified by the seal of blood! You, who have, in a riot of selfish seeking of gain, fallen prey to the cunning of the Empire, and all but sold your liberties for the paltry price of bargains you have long since forgotten! You—reprobate Americans that you are—who have made merchandise of holy things! Consider these, who bear your image, your own flesh and blood! What have you done with *their* freedom? Did not someone strive to make *them* happy? Shall they be subjected to an

economic state of servitude a generation hence, with no hope of Independent Enterprise?

"Great God of our Fathers! What manner of Americans have we become? That we should seek to trade our birthright for a mess of pottage! I call upon you, as parents and as citizens, to witness with me this night that unless we shall forsake our part in this monstrous infamy, and repent our crimes in sackcloth and ashes, we shall see the penalties of our iniquities visited upon our heads, and the heads of our children—even to the third and the fourth generation!

"Shall we *yet* speak of the benefits of this Empire of ours? Shall we heap up added insults by recounting the false promises it has extended? Shall we continue to look upon the Bargain Counter, with its forbidden fruit of *savings* and *prices* which are as deceptive as their authors? No! A million times *NO!* America has never, yet, placed a price upon her Freedom—and, by the Grace of God, she never shall! There is no price great enough . . . no gold pure enough . . . no fortune so vast that it can *buy* our blood-bought estate! It is not ours to sell; it is only ours to prize, ours to enjoy —but ours to preserve for those who shall come after us!

"No creature, though he be the most beautiful and the most subtle of all creation, shall tempt us to continue in our course. We have looked upon the Forbidden Fruit—and, like Eve of Eden, we have seen that it is *Good for Food,* that it is *pleasant to the eyes,* and that it is *desired to make one wise.* But, now, that our eyes have been opened to our sin, let us not robe ourselves in aprons of self-justification, made of

fig leaves of alibis and excuses! Let us, rather, clothe ourselves in the skins which speak of sacrifice, tokens to remind us of our blood-bought liberties, and go forth to war—economic warfare—and stamp out this evil which has sprung up within our borders, and threatened our well-being!

"Wherever the serpentine head of Monopoly is raised, there does Imperialism appear, in all her subtle cunning. *Business must be made safe for Democracy. We cannot build up an Empire in Business, and hope to maintain a Democracy in Government.* Patriotism is not a war-time luxury—it is an all-time necessity. It demands expression, not in *legislation* but in the *personal convictions* of our citizenry. As life is more than meat, so *Liberty is more than Government.* Freedom never reposed in our Government—its destiny lies in the hands of our citizenship. Americanism is not a thing of Governmental achievement; it is the fruit of *prsonal sacrifice.* If we fail in our allegiance to that which has been given us to have and to hold, we stand accused by our own deportment, and convicted by our own craven cowardice.

"It is for us, in this ultra-modern day, to return to the Faith of Our Fathers. Repeating, daily, those immortal words, '*Taxation Without Representation is Tyranny*', the Empire, which threatens us shall not survive. Pledging ourselves, anew, not alone to a *Government*, but likewise to a *Prosperity*, of the people, by the people, for the people, we shall still retain our Paradise of Freedom, we shall still be patriots like unto our forebearers, and our children's children shall never cease to bless our memories!"

For a long moment, as Darling returned to his seat, his audience sat, stunned into silence; then, a great sigh could be heard. There was another hush—then a veritable tumult of applause. Cheers went up, and joined in a medley of noise that rose into a mighty roar. A riot broke loose, when a part of the Pomoroy delegation stamped into the aisle, with Tom Crandall in the lead. Thirty strong, they filed upon the platform to shake his hand; but they dropped back as Darling raised his bowed head from his hands, and lifted a pallid face to them. Tears were streaming down his cheeks; and an outright sob escaped him.

"Don't! Please, boys, *don't!* I can't stand all this —this noise and cheering—with *him*, who should have done it, and received all this, up there, shot and broken, and perhaps *dying!*"

Chapter XXV.

THE ARMISTICE.

THREE weeks had passed; and Bender was upon the mend, again. It was a very weak, and rather dreamy man, whose red head upon the pillow contrasted so sharply with the whiteness of his face. Just now, his deep, cavernous eyes were doing what they had done often of late—feeding upon the fresh sweetness of a face whose very sight and smile had helped to pull him through his dark hour. And he was holding a soft little hand—a hand whose soothing coolness had laid upon his hot brow many an hour during those long, long hours when all had been night in life's lowest ebb, sustaining him when he had felt the world slipping away from him, and bringing him back.

"What's the word, Sweetheart?" he asked.

"Everything is rosy; and you are getting stronger—much stronger. The nurse said you could have visitors, today."

Jason Baker's daughter leaned close to him, and placed her cheek against his.

"And Glenn and Dot are coming down to see you this afternoon. They've been real scouts, those two. And they could be so happy, too, if only Dot would be herself."

Bender looked at her questionably.

"Just what do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, Glenn's just crazy about her; but Dot's the queerest mortal I ever saw. I know she loves him; but she won't give in. Glenn told me, himself, in one of his fits of confidence, that she was beyond him. If Dot throws him down, she's a little idiot."

Bender grinned, in rather ghastly fashion, he was still so thin and pale.

"I've always found that Dorothy has a very good reason for everything she does," he remarked. "There are a lot of things about her that call for explanation; but, there, again, Dorothy stands pat. She insists upon choosing her own time to explain her actions. Dorothy's close-mouthed."

* * * * *

During this conversation, another dramatic event was in process of occurrance in the sunparlor of the hospital. There, Jasper Haine, now recovered sufficiently to warrant discharge in another day, was engaged in his daily visit with Little Betty Harris.

Two miracles had happened in St. Luke's during the past month. The first had been the regeneration of Jasper Haine. The old man, much older in appearance for his recent experience, had been through the harrowing experience of being face-to-face with death. All his money and his power had been of no avail. Now, that he had come back, almost as one from the dead, Jasper Haine had acquired a sense of values which was absolutely foreign to his former self. At first, he had felt strangely alone with his worthless wealth, and his impotent power. Sight of money was revolting to him; thought of his position sickened him. During all that hell of delirium, he had been forced by an unseen hand

to witness a never-ending parade of those whom he had injured, ruined and trampled under foot; and he had wept and prayed to be delivered from it all. Now, that his prayer had been answered, Jasper Haine's inner soul was sick of it all—and yearned to be away from his connections, his position, his power and his wealth. In fact, he was debating the possibility of devoting the balance of his life to the undoing of everything possible that he had done in past years.

The other miracle had been a labor of science. Betty Harris was just beginning to learn to walk. And, during the long rests between her short lessons in locomotion, she had become a very close friend of the lonely old man in the wheel-chair. Every afternoon, and of late, each morning, Jasper Haine and Betty Harris met in the big sunparlor, and there talked about grave matters of life—an exchange of philosophy between childhood and old age, which are, after all, not very far removed. And those conferences had been mutually profitable, too; for Betty had received more flowers, and candy and picture books than she had thought there were in the world, while the old man had gleaned from the child's conversation many things to help in guiding him upon his future course of restitution.

One morning, they had been alone in the parlor. Then, a strange man had come in, and talked a long, long time with Betty's companion. They talked ever so much; and the strange man swore several times, because the old man wanted him to do so many things he didn't want to do. Few of the terms did Betty understand, except that there was something said about some mortgages that must not be foreclosed.

"Just don't get in a sweat!" was what Haine had told Peabody, his associate, "and remember that I'm not dead yet! and I'm running things! I don't wish to be bothered with so many things, just yet; but, when I get back to the office, it won't take me long to tell you where I stand. If the rest of you don't like my new style, then lump it. But I'll be damned if I'll ever pocket another cent when I know it comes out of someone's else living or happiness."

Betty had never approved of swearing; but, somehow, she was inclined to feel that, under such conditions as these, it didn't sound half bad.

And now, the drama.

The old magnate and the little child were sitting side-by-side, looking at a funny paper, when someone came running into the parlor, caught Betty into her arms, and began kissing her, over and over, again.

"Oh, Betty, child!" she crooned, "I couldn't wait another day, to see you."

Betty looked in dazed surprise at Dorothy Herndon.

"Why, Aunty Dot, you're crying!" she exclaimed. "You mustn't cry, now. I'm all better; and really learning to walk. Why do you cry?' '

Dorothy Herndon had hardly been herself of late. Strangely enough, she had been less disturbed about other things than over Betty. At last, when the day had come that they might see Bender for the first time, Darling had agreed to take Dorothy along with him. Glenn now stood in the doorway, watching in amazement this most unusual display of emotion on Dorothy's part.

But another surprise, even greater than this was in store for him. Already, the old man at Betty's side

was leaning forward, gazing wide-eyed at the newcomer. Then, suddenly, Dorothy looked at him. With a scream, she started backward.

"Dot!" cried the old man, in a tremulous voice, "Dot, my girl! Surely, I'm not mistaken—after all these years. Tell me it's my own little Dotty."

Slowly, step by step, the girl approached the wheel-chair, while she studied his face, her baby blue eyes wide, questioning, probing.

"Father! Do you . . . really . . . forgive?" she whispered.

"*Forgive? Me forgive!*" he repeated. "I have nothing to forgive, child! But why did you not come home?"

Dorothy buried her face in the old man's bosom, while his arms went about her shoulders, and they wept it out together.

"And . . . the child?" he asked, finally, as her sobs had subsided. Dot's hand was holding Betty's in a possessive grip.

"This is she," sobbed Dorothy. "Poor child! But, I did my best, Father; and I watched over her, even though I could not keep her. Oh, Daddy, how one must pay for playing with sin!"

Jasper Haine patted the yellow head, and a grimace of pain distorted his face.

"How well I know, child!" he murmured. "Would to God I *could* pay for mine."

Dorothy had risen to her feet. Until that moment, she had forgotten her companion. Now, she approached him, head down.

"Now . . . you understand? Need you ask me, more?" she asked.

Glenn's face was pale, but a soft, forgiving light was in his dark eyes.

"Yes, I . . . understand," he answered. "And, as for asking . . . I shall only ask you once more. Will you be mine?"

Betty had been witnessing things that children are not supposed to see and hear; but Betty, being a remarkable child, took it all as a matter of course. Now, a question trembled upon her lips.

"Aunty Dot! I haven't seen Aunty Bob this morning, yet. Have you heard from Uncle Bill, since last night?"

"Yes, child! Uncle Bill is much better. In fact, you may see him today."

Betty clapped her hands.

"Oh, I'm so happy! And, can't I *walk* in to see him? I want him to see me really *walk*."

"Who is this Uncle Bill she speaks so much about?" asked Haine.

"A man by the name of Bender, from Pomoroy. He was shot the night he rushed Betty here. And he's a real *man*, Daddy! He gave me the glad hand, when I needed it most. Had it not been for him . . . and Bobbie . . . I think I'd have ended it all. Oh, Daddy, he hates you! I think he hates you worse than any other man living. And I do wish so much that you two could now be friends. Especially, now that you have . . . changed."

Darling was grinning. A dramatic situation could not keep him thrilled for long.

"Excuse me, Mr. Haine," he suggested. "But I think I know Bill Bender better than anyone else in the world, unless it be the lady that's soon to be his wife. And,

seeing that you are going to have to put up with me for a son-in-law, very shortly, you may as well get used to taking my advice right now. If you want to have a talk with Billy Bender, you'd better be doing it now, while he is between the sheets; because, after he is up and around, again, you want to keep your distance!"

Haine regarded Darling earnestly.

"I know Bender; have known him for years. And I have always wanted to know what he has against me. That he hates me, I know only too well; but *why?*"

Darling shrugged his shoulders.

"Search me!" he answered; "but, if you want to know real bad, I guess I can arrange a conference. At your own risk, however."

* * * * *

It was a week later, before Darling would consent to Haine accompanying him to Bender's room. But, so rapid had been the patient's recovery that he was well out of danger; and Darling was impatient to clear up the mystery which had always been a puzzler to him. Accordingly, since there were others equally interested, quite a party had met in Bender's room, when Darling ushered Jasper Haine into Bender's presence. As Bender's eyes encountered sight of his old enemy, his form stiffened, and a cold snarl, unlike anything Bobbie had ever seen upon his face, curled his upper lip and bared his teeth. While her heart fluttered in her surprise at his intense reaction, she leaned close to him and whispered in his ear.

"Don't, Billy!" she pleaded. "He wants to make things right. Whatever he's done, it is not too much to forgive. Give him a chance."

With a mighty effort of self-control, Bender lay still, as the old man approached his bedside.

"I shall not add insult to injury, sir, by offering you my hand before I extend my apologies," said Haine, his voice very low.

Bender's answer came with a sneer.

"And I suppose your *apologies* will be expected to replace all that you have ruined? You can make a literal hell for someone else—then wipe your slate clean with an apology. Not yet, sir! Not with me!"

Haine shook his head sadly.

"I'm sure I do not know why you should hate me so. Of course, we have been enemies—but I'm certain that I have never been *personal* about it."

Bender laughed outright, a hard, bitter laugh.

"That's it! You were *never personal*, in your deviltry —which made it the worse. Had you been personal about it, you would have required a reason; but, because you were so impersonal, you needed no other reason than just a little more money—more *business!*"

Haine refused to be irritated. His humility was abject.

"Won't you please tell me about it?" he asked, patiently. "At least, I should like to know."

For a full minute, Bender studied Haine's face narrowly. Then, with a snap of the jaw, he motioned Haine to a chair.

"They tell me you have changed, Haine. As I look at you, I believe you have. And that is the only reason for my filling your request, not because it will make you happy, but because it will add the more to your torture of mind—if you *have* changed."

Again, Bender paused, while he regarded Haine through half-closed eyes, hard as flint, and burning with a cold light. Haine sat with head bowed, chin resting upon his cane, even after Bender had begun speaking, again.

"I shall tell you a story." Bender set out. "It begins just after the Spanish-American War. There was a man, whose name doesn't matter, yet, who had been wounded at El Caney, and who had been discharged from the army wounded for life. He had returned to his home in a Mississippi Valley town, to his wife and two children, under a handicap and practically without means, but with an ambition to make something of and for himself and family.

"He engaged, after a year or two, in the manufacture of soap. He made a yellow bar of laundry soap, to retail at the popular price; and succeeded in introducing it to the public through the local stores in his community. His soap proved to be very satisfactory; and his business grew, until every grocer in six countries around handled his product exclusively in that line.

"Just when it seemed that he would become a success, misfortune overtook him, removing his wife from the family circle to the nearby cemetery, and leaving him with two little kiddies upon his hands, and a business which he must now run alone. For a time, he almost gave up; but, for the sake of his little boy and girl, he took courage again, and pushed his business as best he could. After two more years, he again bade fair to be successful. Then, one day, a representative of a Chicago firm, which had been more than once rebuffed in its attempts to upset the ex-soldier's competition in

that territory, came into the district, determined that he would drive out the local soap maker, by fair means or foul.

"It was so easy! Did he do it by cutting the price of his own product, as one might have expected? No! He didn't even make a pretense of competition. He simply went from store to store, and bought up every bar of that man's product, paying the grocer the full retail price for his entire stock. Then, he placed a closing-out price of two cents per bar upon the entire lot, and told the grocer that he could keep the two cents for his trouble; and that his company would put in a similar quantity of *his* soap to take the place of the discontinued line.

"Every merchant, with one exception, baited into becoming a party to the trick, for the price of *two cents*, sold out. Over night that ex-soldier's business was reduced to nothing. He had been shot in the back, without a chance to defend himself. Six months later, that man, broken in health, as well as broken in spirit, lost his mind and ended his own life—a suicide, leaving two penniless children as helpless cares upon society!

"A kind neighbor lady took the children into her home; and for a time it appeared that they might be almost happy, after all. Then, one night, her husband, coming home in a drunken rage, began beating the little girl. The boy interfered, and received the beating, instead. In the dead of the night, the two tots ran away from this new terror, and became lost in the dark. Along toward morning, they came to a road, where a bridge crossed a river. The girl, who was the younger

of the pair, lay down upon the planking, completely tired out.

"As the lad tried to arouse her, she rolled away from him in her stupor, and fell into the river. The body was recovered the following day, three miles below the bridge.

"What that boy suffered in the next twenty-five years were better imagined than told. Beaten from pillar to post, kicked out here, or tolerated there for what odd jobs he might do, he has grown into a manhood, hardened toward his enemies, suspicious of his best friends, robbed of the finer things of life . . . a victim of Big Business.

"Look me over, Haine! Size me up for what I am —scarred for life, in body, mind and soul! Then, lash yourself, if you have a conscience! For *you were the man who did the trick* . . . and I was that innocent victim of your ruthless ambition. And I am not alone! There are thousands more like me! Big Business' hands are red with the blood of those whom it has strangled for gain! Profits! *Blood Money!* I hate you, and I hate your system. Call it Business, if you will; but may I never realize a happy moment if I stoop to such a deed for profit."

Haine sat as one in a daze.

"I remember," he muttered weakly, "how well I remember! I had forgotten it . . . just one of the many forgotten things that daily come up to haunt me. What can I say, more than that I am sorry. God knows I'd give my last copper to right the wrongs I've done."

Haine's gaze had become glued upon Bender's face,

their eyes meeting squarely, the one hard, the other pleading. A long time, they clenched in silence. Then Bender spoke.

"You *say* that, Haine! But, do you mean it?" he challenged.

"Indeed I do!" cried Haine in earnest tones. "Try me!"

Bender sat bolt upright. A groan escaped him, as the pain shot through his body, but he pushed Bobbie's restraining hand gently aside.

"Then, go back to your office!" he fairly shouted. "Go back to your machine, and reverse its motion! Release your slaver's hold upon the soil you've confiscated! Liberate the industries you've caught in your web of intrigue and business plotting! Set your subjects to undoing what they've done at your command; and employ the brains God gave you in the service rather than in the servitude of mankind! Do this; then come back, and I'll forgive you! That's more than I would have promised you a year ago. I swore to heaven I'd never forgive nor forget . . . but, it's different, somehow . . . now."

His voice had lowered; and a suspicion of moisture had appeared in the blue eyes where the fire had burned itself out.

"It's different—after you've known the touch of kind hands, and felt the beatings of hearts that beat in common with your own!"

Jasper Haine had left his chair, and come to Bender's bedside.

"All that you have demanded, Bender, has already been done," said he. "But I haven't stopped with that.

Only today, I took advantage of my political power, which I built up by years of careful planning for myself, and machinery is now in motion to clean out the strongholds of this economic sin in high places in the Capitol. Orders have gone out to every branch of our holdings to break up, and return to the Independent System. Every Orange-Front lease will be offered for sale to private parties, next Monday morning. And, listen, Bender! You may believe me, or not; but this has been the happiest day of my life. And, if you don't believe what I tell you, my son-in-law will confirm my statements."

"That's right, Bill," chimed in Darling.

Bender's eyes widened in their astonishment, as he looked from Haine to Darling.

"*Son-in-law!*" he gasped.

"Sure!" cried Darling. "Dorothy and I completed the deal just this morning. The trend of the times, you know, Old Man—just another merger, so to speak!"

"But I don't understand," persisted Bender. "Dorothy Herndon's husband Jasper Haine's *son-in-law!*"

The self-deposed monopolist shook his head.

"Of course, you don't understand. Nor am I going to explain it all, now. I shall leave that to Dorothy to do in her own good time," he said. "Suffice it to say that you have had no monopoly upon human misery, my boy. Big Business is a curse, not only to those whom she oppresses, but to those whom she blesses, as well! It killed your father; but my lot has been worse than death. It has ruined your youth, but it has left me a wreck in old age. It broke your childhood home—it

wrecked my family. Sometimes, I think that kings must be the most miserable of men; and we rich men the most wretched. No wonder Christ said '*How Hardly shall a rich man enter into the kingdom of Heaven*'. He knew how most riches came, my boy. Thank God that you're poor; and forgive a poor, rich, old man for his wrongs, will you? Please! You won't deny me that happiness, will you? I cannot endure the hatred of the man who was a father to my child, after wealth and luxury had robbed me of her, and left her worse than an orphan. Will you shake hands on that?"

The old man's lips were trembling with emotion; Darling was blinking suspiciously; and Dorothy, her head bowed in one hand was weeping softly. Bender's face was working curiously, its muscles twitching with the struggle going on within.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he murmured, as he grasped the proffered hand. "But I didn't know! It takes a *man* to do as you have done, Haine—a bigger man than *I*. Had I but known, I should have made it easier for you. As it is, I, too, must be forgiven!"

* * * * *

They had gone—all but Darling and Bobbie. The door had closed behind an old man and his long-lost daughter who were to return together to the big, empty house back of the Capitol, which was soon to be dismantled and sold—put out of mind with its hell of memories.

Darling stood at the foot of the bed, hat in hand, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. Bender watched him quizzically.

"Well, what is it, Dar? Get it off your chest, so you can be yourself, again."

Darling cleared his throat.

"It's about my making that speech that night. It couldn't be helped; but it was too darn bad I had to step in and walk off with the spotlight. I just wanted you to know how I felt about it. That's all that can be done about it, I guess."

Bender motioned Darling to his side, and extended his hand.

"Please, Dar, don't mention it, again. I was mean enough to feel a bit cut up over it; but, when Dot told me how you did it all, and when I read your speech in the papers after it was a week old, I kicked myself for an egotist and a fool.

"You poor kids—Bobbie and you and Dot—certainly had your trials with me . . . me, who insisted upon making *our* fight *my* fight. You know, Dar? Haine taught me that lesson for the last time, today."

"What lesson is that?' '

"That trying to establish a monopoly on trouble is the most sinful of all monopolies. Here, I've been carrying a very hell of hatred within my heart all my life; and it would have cheated me out of every friend I would have had, had you kids not taken me in hand.

"This job of being Americans is nobody's job in particular—it's *everybody's in general.* It's no job for the jealous. It takes a good sport to be a good American. It was my job to prepare the way for you, Dar; but that speech was your job to do. Like a ninny I tried to do another man's work, and I was pushed out of the way. We've each done our respective

parts. You've been a great team-mate, Old Man; I could always depend upon you being on the job to do the thing I couldn't do. Now, I've just one more favor to ask—just one more thing that I can't do. Will you do it for me?"

"Sure!" grinned Darling, relieved, and at ease with himself and the world, again. "Just name it?"

Bender struck a very serious pose.

"I owe Dot something for all she's done for me. I suppose I'm going to lose my secretary, pretty soon; and it's only right that she be given some token of my esteem. There are two reasons why I can't do this, myself. You're one; and Bobbie, here, is the other. So, when you get back to your wife, just give her a kiss, and tell her it's from me, will you?"

"Sure!" grinned Darling, again. "Guess I'll be going, now. The wife will be waiting for me, up at the big house on the hill. But, don't forget!" with a meaning nod in Bobbie's direction. "There's somebody else that's waiting for some of that appreciation stuff—and that's an order that calls for your own delivery! So-long!"

Chapter XXVI.

TYRANNY TREMBLES!

O Columbia! The gem of the ocean,
The home of the brave and the free;
The shrine of each patriot's devotion,
A world offers homage to thee!
Thy mandates make heroes assemble,
When Liberty's form stands in view;
Thy banners make tyranny tremble,
When borne by the Red, White and Blue!

AMERICAN Democracy had done the deed in no uncertain manner! An issue had been submitted to her decree; and she had met the issue squarely. Independent Business, convinced of its own impotence against its overwhelming foe, had appealed its cause to the Supreme Court of Public Opinion, beyond which there is no superior court where the masses rule! Democracy had now investigated the case to her utter satisfaction. She had attended the festivities of Big Business, and witnessed the lavish luxury which surrounded the courts of commercial rulers in high places. She had visited the firesides of the oppressed, and had dressed the wounds of the maimed and the bleeding among the common populace. She had dug deep into the wealth of American traditions, and had sat again at the feet of her sages, learning anew her forgotten lessons of Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness. Then, re-assured in her own heart, she had girded her loins again, and gone forth to war!

It had been the voice of another Paul Revere, carried out this time into the night air upon the waves of the ether, that had called upon Madam Democracy to avenge the wrongs which a tyrant was heaping upon her people; and her answer had come instantly—with the readiness of the Minute Men who first stood guard over her cause! Within a fortnight, an entire nation had been aroused. Newspapers loaded their editorial guns with this new ammunition, "Democracy in Trade!" Farm journals called upon their readers to ally themselves with the cause of *Americanism at the Counter!* Labor publications appealed to the armies of American toilers to *make the nation's payroll safe for Democracy!* And the *Women*, America's Mothers, patterning their schemes after the ideals of their homespun mothers of other decades, rose to the situation as our women have ever risen in a crisis, demanding that Freedom and Liberty should be preserved for their children *at any cost . . .* and promptly forsook the *Syndicate's Bargain Counter!*

There began to appear upon the plate-glass of every Main Street in every country town the words: "THIS STORE IS AN INDEPENDENT!" Almost immediately, a popular clamor for public indentification of all places of business went up! An insignia was registered at the Copyright Office, and a central bureau was established in Washington for the registration of Independent Merchants throughout the country. All registrations were furnished with the insignia and the free right of its use. The appearance of this emblem upon any place of business was a public guarantee of its

Independence and non-alliance with any and all centralizations in trade.

Big Business, which had once been so brave and bold in its boasts of superiority, quickly betrayed its cowardice. Like the King of Babylon, when Democracy's finger wrote upon the wall the fateful words, "MENE, MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN!" it was smitten with fear. It required no interpreter to satisfy Big Business as to the meaning of all this. As the records and reports continued to come in at "headquarters," the Kings of Commerce were quick to read the handwriting of the mysterious hand—"*God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. Thy kingdom is divided and given to thine enemies.*"

There followed a great scramble in the courts of Big Business. The forces of the "Inevitable"—the *Trend-of-the-times*—were completely demoralized in the face of popular revolt. An outraged populace demanded an accounting, and it was up to Big Business to come to terms of peace, not of its own making. To save its investments, it signed the treaty written by Democracy's hand, almost before it had read her terms.

Old alliances were broken up; secret combines dissolved; mergers became liquidated, and a producing, consuming mass had performed its conquest, long before another session of an impotent Congress had convened. By that time, there remained little or no *reason* for legislation. A *referendum* had been carried out, and its returns were beyond question. Big Business was satisfied to scurry under cover, and pledge itself to Ameri-

can standards of trade as a matter of *Good Business*, if nothing more.

In vain had Big Business cried, "Boycott!"

"Boycott is un-American!" screamed out one editorial advocate of Big Business.

"How do you get that way?" retorted another. "Boycott is only the *Voice of the People in Business*. It is absolutely American. And it is an institution which Big Business dare not ignore."

That was all there was to it. A people had spoken—and that was enough. The *Mandate* had gone out; America's *heroes* had assembled; and *Tyranny* had trembled as the Banner of Freedom had taken on a new and practical meaning. It had all been so easy, when everyone had thought it would be so hard.

History had repeated itself, after one hundred and fifty years. Another classic treatise upon Independence had been written, to be preserved in the pages of history. A gold-glutted generation had washed its hands clean, in order that it might embrace again the untarnished principles of Liberty. Now, the dark night of misunderstanding past, an entire nation turned its face toward the red dawn of a new day.

Pomoroy was just one of those ordinary country towns, where people had learned how to be neighbors, again. Dad Shanks, more rheumatic and more asthmatic than in former years, but still exceedingly alive to himself and the world at large, sat upon Jason Baker's counter, reading the week's edition of the *Pilot*. Suddenly, a headline caught his eye. Looking up quickly he fastened an accusing gaze upon the broad back of a red haired gentleman who was engaged in selecting some

oranges from the window display, with one hand, while a rollicking youngster upon the other arm struggled to knock his father's hat into Jason's pickle barrel.

"Hey, Bender!" he croaked. "Dad burn ye, w'y didn't y'u *tell* me what y'u wanted that there pasture o' mine fer, north o' town?"

Bender faced his accuser with his old, broad grin. "Why? It's paid for, isn't it?"

"That ain't the idear!" cried the old-timer. "If i'da knowed y'u wuz gonna use it fer one o' them there contaminated golf links, I'da told y'u t' take a jump in the lake. *Now*, I s'pose y'u *will* be wearin' bloomers, after all we done t' keep y'u from gettin' ee-feminate!"

Thus, a community had returned to its previous democratic order, increasingly free from the sear of jealousy, but with this difference—that they understood better than ever the meaning of life, and more than ever the truth that *Life is more than Meat—that Living is more than Drink*—and that *THERE IS MORE IN LIFE THAN A LIVING—MORE THAN MONEY CAN BUY.*

God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,
Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine,
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget.

The tumult and the shouting dies,
The captains and the kings depart,
Still stands Thine ancient Sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget.

Far-called our navies melt away,
On dune and headline sinks the fire;
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Ninevah and Tyre.
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget.

If, drunk with sight of power, we loose,
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe—
Such boasting as the Gentiles use
Or lesser breeds without the Law—
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget.

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking gold and silver barred,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding calls not Thee to guard—
For frantic boasts and foolish word,
Thy Mercy on Thy people, Lord.

Amen.

—Rudyard Kipling's "Recessional."